

**Migration, Freedom and Enslavement in the Revolutionary
Atlantic: The Bahamas, 1783–c. 1800**

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I, Paul Daniel Shirley, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of revolution upon slavery in the Atlantic world, focusing upon the period of profound and unprecedented change and conflict in the Bahamas during the final decades of the eighteenth century. It argues that the Bahamian experience can only be satisfactorily understood with reference to the revolutionary upheavals that were transforming the larger Atlantic world in those years.

From 1783, the arrival of black and white migrants displaced by the American Revolution resulted in quantitative and qualitative social, economic and political transformation in the Bahamas. The thesis assesses the nature and significance of the sudden demographic shift to a non-white majority in the archipelago, the development of many hitherto unsettled islands, and efforts to construct a cotton-based plantation economy. It also traces the trajectory and dynamics of the complex struggles that ensued from these changes. During the 1780s, émigré Loyalist slaveholders from the American South, intent on establishing a Bahamian plantocracy, confronted not only non-white Bahamians exploring enlarged possibilities for greater control over their own lives, but also an existing white population determined to defend their own interests, and a belligerent governor with a penchant for idiosyncratic antislavery initiatives.

In the 1790s, a potentially explosive situation was inflamed still further as a new wave of war and revolution engulfed the Atlantic. The various ways in which Bahamians responded to the prospect of the new possibilities seemingly opened up by the Haitian Revolution would have lasting consequences.

Whilst engaging critically with both the detail and general interpretive tendencies of existing Bahamian historiography, the thesis seeks to demonstrate the manifold, complex, and contingent nature of the relationship between the eighteenth-century revolutions and the Atlantic slave system. As such, it aims to show the potential of an Atlantic history integrating local and more general perspectives to facilitate a more nuanced and fully transnational account of the 'Age of Revolution'.

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List of Abbreviations

Add. MSS	Additional Manuscripts Series, British Library, London
BDA	Bahamas Department of Archives, Nassau, Bahamas
CO	Colonial Office Papers, National Archives, London
CUP	Cambridge University Press
DCRO	Derbyshire County Record Office, Matlock
<i>FHQ</i>	<i>Florida Historical Quarterly</i>
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
JCBL	John Carter Brown Library, Providence, Rhode Island
<i>JNH</i>	<i>Journal of Negro History</i>
<i>JSH</i>	<i>Journal of Southern History</i>
LC	Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
OUP	Oxford University Press
RGD	Registrar General's Department, Nassau, Bahamas
S.C.	Bahamas Supreme Court Papers: General Court Minutes
<i>WMQ</i>	<i>William and Mary Quarterly</i>
WO	War Office Papers, National Archives, London

Introduction

In the spring of 1788, a sequence of strange events unfolded on the island of Abaco, in the Bahamas. On Sunday 4 March, the planter Richard Pearis was having dinner with friends at his estate at Spencer's Bight, one of several settlements recently established on Abaco by Pearis and other American Loyalist émigrés, when proceedings were interrupted by the arrival of Samuel Mackay, captain of the Bahamian governor's schooner, the *Shearwater*. Mackay declared that he was looking for contraband corn, and demanded the keys to the plantation house and cellar. Pearis refused, asking Mackay 'repeatedly to show his Authority, and Warned him at his peril from breaking or attempting to force any of [his stores], or to molest any of my property'. In response, after threatening 'to make everyone present Prisoners', Mackay 'went to his Boat and brought up Armed White Men and Negroes whom he placed [as] Sentries' around the estate. He then had 'Armed Negroes with an Axe' break down the doors to Pearis's stores, and seized 401 bushels of corn 'in the King's Name.'¹

Many details of what happened next are ambiguous. It is clear that in the wake of this episode large numbers of the people held as slaves at Spencer's Bight 'absconded'; Pearis lost at least two of his own slaves, and reported that 'some of our Neighbours are left without their House Servants, and all have more or less of our slaves gone to the Woods'.² What remains uncertain is why this mass flight happened, what the motives of the runaways were, and the precise role, if any, played by the crew of the *Shearwater* in provoking it.

Several weeks later, Pearis stated that the slaves 'who have been retaken, or come in, uniformly declare that they were misled by Captain Mackey and his Crew who told them he had the Governor's Authority to carry them to Nassau [the colonial capital] and that all the Rebel Property Negroes would be made free.' Petitioning the

¹ Affidavit of Richard Pearis, 16 May 1788, CO23/29/304–5; Pearis to William Coleman, Spencer's Bight, 16 May 1788, CO23/29/303. Before the American Revolution, Pearis had been a substantial landowner, first in Virginia, then in South Carolina. During the War of Independence, after being arrested and imprisoned by the Charleston council of safety in 1775, he served in various Loyalist provincial corps, attaining the rank of lieutenant colonel by 1780. See Lydia Austin Parrish, 'Records of some Southern Loyalists. Being a collection of manuscripts about some eighty families, most of whom immigrated to the Bahamas during and after the American Revolution', Harvard University, Houghton MS. AM 1547 (photocopy typescript in BDA; cited hereafter as 'Parrish, "Records"'), 419–20; Sandra Riley, *Homeward Bound: A history of the Bahama Islands to 1850 with a definitive study of Abaco in the American Loyalist plantation period* (Miami: Island Research, 1983), 253, n. 8.

² Pearis to Coleman, Spencer's Bight, 16 May 1788, CO23/29/303.

governor for assistance, other white residents of Spencer's Bight were still more explicit, claiming that 'many of their slaves... came in open day before your Memorialists faces, and put their baggage on board said Mackay's boat'.³ According to Pearis, Mackay displayed a letter of authority signed by the governor, 'but would neither Read it himself or allow it to be done by any Person present.' Nonetheless, some accounts of the proceedings quoted this letter as advising Mackay that 'if you should be in want of assistance you can get six or eight of the *armed Negroes in the woods*', including one '*poor wounded fellow*' who had been 'shot in the very Act of presenting his musket at a white man'.⁴

Of course, it is scarcely surprising that those slaves 'who have been retaken, or come in', should prefer to 'uniformly declare that they were misled by Captain Mackay and his Crew', rather than admit their own responsibility for eloping. Reports of what happened all stress that many slaveholders had been left 'even without their household-servants'. Many such people would have been waiting at the Pearis dinner table when they were presented with the novel and exciting spectacle of those '*armed Negroes*' from the *Shearwater* inverting the usual racial hierarchy at their masters' expense.⁵

The presence of the other rebels who had already taken to the woods suggests that pre-existing social tensions at Spencer's Bight were also at work. Certainly, the slaves seem to have showed little hesitation in seizing the opportunity to escape when they were prevented from boarding Mackay's vessel. Nor did they prove in any great hurry to return to their owners once he had left. A month later, the 'Planters and other Inhabitants' of Spencer's Bight were contemplating the complete breakdown of their incipient plantocracy. Fearing 'nothing less than an insurrection of their Slaves, and

³ Pearis to Coleman, Spencer's Bight, 16 May 1788, CO23/29/303-4; 'Memorial of the Planters and other Inhabitants of the Island of Abaco, residing at Spencer's Bight', 6 May 1788, in William Wyly, *A Short Account of the Bahama Islands, their Climate, Productions, &c. To which are added, Some Strictures upon their relative and political Situation, the Defects of their present Government &c.* (London, 1789), 40. Contemporary spellings of Mackay's name are inconsistent.

⁴ Pearis to Coleman, Spencer's Bight, 16 May 1788, CO23/29/304; the extracts from Mackay's letter of authority are quoted, with comments on the '*poor wounded fellow*' and the caveat 'whether genuine or not is uncertain', in [William Wyly], 'A short Account of the Bahama Islands, their Climate, Productions &c...', Add. MSS 6058, f. 50, note e, and also in an annotated copy of the 6 May Spencer's Bight Memorial at CO23/29/283-4. This was one of several notes omitted from the printed version of Wyly's *Short Account*. The emphases are Wyly's.

⁵ Pearis to Coleman, Spencer's Bight, 16 May 1788, CO23/29/303-4 (emphasis in original); Wyly, *Short Account*, 22; 'Memorial of the Planters and other Inhabitants of the Island of Abaco, residing at Spencer's Bight', 6 May 1788, in Wyly, *Short Account*, 40.

eventually to be obliged to relinquish their houses and plantations’, they called on the governor for ‘such speedy relief as their *critical situation requires*.’⁶

By 20 May, word had reached the colonial authorities at New Providence of ‘the Slaves upon Abaco... *having taken up arms*’, and the governor consulted with the colonial Council as to how to deal with the situation. Concluding that ‘bringing the said Negroes to this Island for the Purpose of their being tried would be attended with great Expense and difficulty and would be perhaps impracticable’, the governor decided ‘upon going there in person,’ to set up a tribunal acting under ‘a special Commission’ from the Council.⁷

However, the purpose of this ad hoc court was not to punish the Abaconian rebels, but rather, ‘to enquire into the claims of freedom set up by Negroes’. The governor’s subsequent report to the Secretary of State in London stated that ‘upon our arrival at Abaco all the outlying Negroes came in except five or Six who are supposed to have got off the Island. Those that were entitled to their freedom were declared so, and the others returned peacefully to their owners.’⁸

At one level, this episode is merely an instance of how black people in the Bahamas directly contested their enslavement, in a way that seems to offer at least a modest parallel to the insurrectionary and maroon modes of resistance practised more often and on a much larger scale in other sites of Atlantic slavery. But the affair throws up other issues that are more intriguing and tantalising. Did Mackay really come to Spencer’s Bight that Sunday to incite ‘Acts of open rebellion’ among slaves, and, if necessary, to consort with armed outlaws? If so, did he merely ‘spread such Confusion among our Negroes’ in order to facilitate his seizure of the allegedly smuggled goods, or did he genuinely carry a mandate from the royal governor of the Bahamas for issuing to the slaves ‘a general invitation... to desert the service of their Owners, and appear to claim their freedom’? Why, indeed, did the governor subsequently adopt such a conciliatory approach towards people whom he might more readily have been expected to ruthlessly hunt down and punish?⁹

⁶ ‘Memorial of the Planters and other Inhabitants of the Island of Abaco, residing at Spencer’s Bight’, 6 May 1788, in Wylly, *Short Account*, 40–41 (emphasis in original).

⁷ Wylly, *Short Account*, 22–3 (Wylly’s emphasis); Journals of the Council, 20 May 1788, CO23/28/26–7; Earl of Dunmore to Lord Sydney, Nassau, 18 July 1788, CO23/27/164–5.

⁸ Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 18 July 1788, CO23/27/165.

⁹ Wylly, *Short Account*, 22; Pearis to Coleman, Spencer’s Bight, 16 May 1788, CO23/29/303; Wylly to Evan Nepean, Rye, Sussex, 27 September 1789, CO23/29/273.

These events have not gone unnoticed by historians. However, the existing historiography consists of brief and sometimes confused accounts that generally tend to downplay the ambiguities and complexity of what happened at Spencer's Bight.¹⁰ Typically, scholars have emphasised that of thirty applicants to the court convened on Abaco to examine claims to freedom, twenty-nine are said to have been 'ajudged to be Slaves'. In the absence of any official documentation of the proceedings of the tribunal held at Spencer's Bight, this summary of its proceedings is derived solely from William Wylly's 1789 pamphlet, *A Short Account of the Bahama Islands*, a text whose overt and unashamed partisanship renders its reliability at least open to question.¹¹ On this basis, historians usually regard the affair primarily as evidence of the 'duplicity' of a governor who was thoroughly complicit in the suppression and re-enslavement of blacks who dared to challenge the colonial slave regime.¹²

Aside from the manner in which it downplays all the other indications of the governor's having played a far more ambiguous role, this reading would certainly have bemused Wylly himself. Writing self-consciously as an advocate for the Bahamian slaveholding class, Wylly's *Short Account* sought to show how a despotic governor, acting out of personal hostility, venality, and misplaced sympathy for black people, had established 'an unconstitutional Tribunal' administered by 'the most improper persons', whereby 'the Planter has... been robbed of his property, by arbitrary decisions.' Regarding the events at Spencer's Bight, Wylly was actually pointing out that even after the governor 'gave a general invitation to the Negroes to come in and claim their freedom', almost all were supposedly found to be slaves 'even by *this Court*, held under the Governor's *immediate inspection*.'¹³

¹⁰ See for instance Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 175–6; Michael Craton & Gail Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream: A history of the Bahamian people, I: From aboriginal times to the end of slavery* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 187; Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black resistance in a revolutionary age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 186; Michael Craton, 'The Ambivalencies of Independency: The transition out of slavery in the Bahamas, c. 1800–1850' in Roderick A. McDonald, ed., *West Indies Accounts: Essays on the history of the British Caribbean and the Atlantic economy in honour of Richard Sheridan* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 1996), 278–9; Whittington Bernard Johnson, *Race Relations in the Bahamas, 1783–1834: The nonviolent transformation from a slave to a free society* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 70.

¹¹ On the problems of Wylly as a source see pp. 33–4 below.

¹² Wylly, *Short Account*, 22; Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 176; this interpretation is perhaps most forcefully stated in Craton, 'Ambivalencies of Independency', but is apparent to varying degrees in all of the works cited in n. 10 above.

¹³ Wylly, *Short Account*, 22–3 (Wylly's emphasis).

As these remarks might suggest, Spencer's Bight has to be situated within the broader trajectories of Bahamian history. The eruption of 'open rebellion' that Sunday can be seen as the climax of an ongoing and sometimes violent conflict between slaveholders and their bondspeople that had dogged the settlements at Abaco from their inception half a decade earlier. By the end of the 1780s, it was becoming evident to all concerned that plantation slavery would not prove feasible on the island.

The affair also emerged out of, and ultimately intensified, an increasingly bitter political contention among white Bahamians over the colonial state's apparent support for black efforts to contest enslavement and obtain freedom. At one level, this study explores how these themes were played out in the Bahamas during the 1780s and 1790s. It traces the dynamic interactions of the initiatives and conflicting agendas of a diverse array of protagonists, including non-whites, slaveholders, and agents of the imperial government. In the process, I aim to provide a fuller and more satisfactory account of how and why the dramatic expansion and refinement of the Bahamian slave regime in those decades coincided with a remarkable and unprecedented contestation of the legitimacy of enslavement in the colony.

Understanding what happened at Spencer's Bight also requires an appreciation of the consequences of the American Revolution for the Bahamas. Without reference to the tortuous and winding road that white and black settlers had travelled from what was by then the United States to Abaco, the meaning and evident resonance of Mackay's allusion to 'Rebel Property Negroes' necessarily remain obscure. Similarly, the governor's role in the affair needs to be considered in light of his own revolutionary history. A decade earlier, as Virginia's last royal governor, John Murray, fourth earl of Dunmore, had conceived of '*armed Negroes*' as potential agents of British imperial power, declaring 'Servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) free.'¹⁴ Then too, as at Spencer's Bight, slaves fled from their owners in response to his actions, which in turn provoked outrage and indignation from slaveholders.

Historians have often seen the sequence of revolutionary crises that engulfed the Atlantic world from the 1770s onwards as a relatively peripheral phenomenon for the Bahamas and even the British West Indies more generally, one whose 'effects

¹⁴ Proclamation by Lord Dunmore, 7 November 1775, CO5/1353/335.

were not always obvious or direct and were never fundamental.’¹⁵ In recent years, Bahamian historiography in particular has instead emphasised the importance of more gradual, evolutionary developments, driven largely by local factors. To be sure, the explosive intensity of the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions has no direct counterpart in the Bahamian experience. The ‘Age of Revolution’ was a ‘messy, ambiguous, and complicated story’,¹⁶ and so were its manifestations in the Bahamas; but they were tangible and pervasive all the same. It is my contention that, as well as Spencer’s Bight, a great deal else that occurred in the late eighteenth-century Bahamas can be rendered more intelligible when considered in terms of this influence.

In turn, an exploration of Bahamian history can cast new light on the revolutionary upheavals that would profoundly affect both the discourses and realities of power, empire, race, and slavery for people on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond from the 1770s onwards. For instance, when considered in the context of his sustained and hugely acrimonious involvement in the contentious status of African Americans in the Bahamas, Dunmore’s appeal to slaves in Virginia begins to look like rather more than the act of cynical expediency that historians have usually believed it to be.¹⁷ More generally, this study seeks to illustrate how the Bahamian perspective, by at least partially sidestepping the spatial and temporal constraints imposed by better known historiographical traditions, can facilitate a better appreciation of the formidable scope, complexity and diversity of the Revolutionary Atlantic.

¹⁵ Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 161.

¹⁶ Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The unruly birth of democracy and the struggle to create America* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005), xviii.

¹⁷ See pp. 66–7 below.

I: Slavery and the Atlantic Revolutionary Crisis

There had been sporadic condemnations of slavery in the Americas from at least the mid-seventeenth century.¹⁸ The enslaved themselves, of course, contested New World slavery from its inception whenever and however they could, and had not always done so without allies. Most obviously, the endemic threats of insurrection and marronage imposed tangible constraints on slaveholders' pretensions to a position of absolute domination.¹⁹

But prior to the 1760s, a daunting confluence of political and economic interests, ideology, and power largely succeeded in rendering the mass exploitation of enslaved black labour an apparently insuperable facet of the Atlantic world.²⁰ Then, in the course of that 'overwhelming and bewildering concatenation of events' that is conventionally subsumed under the rubric of 'the American Revolution,'²¹ this formidable aegis of material and discursive structures was subjected to intense stress and disruption. As its fault-lines were exposed, the prospect of challenges to slavery of a kind that had hitherto seemed, if not simply 'unthinkable',²² either literally or politically all-but suicidal, took on a novel air of plausibility.

One such challenge came from the emergence of abolitionism as an active political campaign. Critiques of Atlantic slavery had been quietly developing and

¹⁸ See for instance *Tyrannipocrit, Discovered with his whiles, wherewith he vanquisheth* (Rotterdam, 1649); ed. Andrew Hopton (London: Aporia Press, 1990), 30–31; J. Philmore [pseud.], *Two Dialogues on the Man-Trade* (London, 1760). On the latter see David Brion Davis, 'New Sidelights on Early Antislavery Radicalism,' *WMQ* 3rd ser., 28:4 (October 1971), 592–4.

¹⁹ Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American slave revolts in the making of the modern world* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 1–71; Michael Craton, 'The Rope and the Cutlass: Slave resistance in plantation America', in *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom in the Caribbean* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1997), 185–95; Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the baroque to the modern 1492–1800* (London: Verso, 1997), 256–8, 322, 344–50; Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel slave communities in the Americas* (3rd edn., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

²⁰ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770–1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 39–49, 84–6; idem, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York: OUP, 1984), 72–82; Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776–1848* (London: Verso, 1988), 3–20, 35.

²¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (rev. edn., London: Verso, 1991), 80; Anderson uses this expression to describe the French Revolution.

²² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the production of history* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 70–107.

gaining currency in Europe and America for much of the eighteenth century.²³ Indeed, several historians have argued for the existence of a ‘diffuse if inert antislavery consensus prevailing among certain Anglo-American intellectuals’ by the late 1760s.²⁴ What these critiques generally lacked, however, was a means of translating antislavery ideas into effective practice in the present or near future. Christopher Brown’s observation that ‘an antislavery *movement* did not have to happen in Britain’ is equally applicable to the eighteenth-century Atlantic world as a whole. The American Revolution’s trajectory and outcome generated a fortuitous convergence of circumstances that enabled a substantial constituency in Britain and North America to consider abolitionism not only as a personal and national moral imperative, but also as a cause that was politically plausible, and even expedient.²⁵

But beyond this, the American Revolution offered compelling evidence of how the existing order of things might be radically transformed within the compass of historical time by human agency. The sense for contemporaries of a ‘blasting open of the continuum of history’ is readily apparent in Tom Paine’s assertion that ‘we have it in our power to begin the world over again.’²⁶ The very fact of the Revolution did much to broaden antislavery’s horizons of possibility, and not merely for white Americans and Britons. Enslaved African Americans noted with interest the vehemence with which their masters ‘resolved to die freemen rather than to live Slaves’; as early as 1766, in the wake of the Stamp Act crisis, reports in Charles

²³ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (New York: OUP, 1966), 291–445; Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 34–101; Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and slave emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 59–62.

²⁴ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 114; cf. the similar but somewhat broader formulation in Davis, *Age of Revolution*, 272.

²⁵ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 211 (my emphasis).

²⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 193; Anderson paraphrases a formulation from Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, tr. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973), 264, 263; [Thomas Paine], *Common Sense* (2nd edn., Philadelphia, 1776), 87. For a discussion of how American Revolutionary political discourse defined freedom in terms of ‘individuals’ ability to act in secular time and shape their circumstances’, see François Furstenberg, ‘Beyond Freedom and Slavery: Autonomy, virtue, and resistance in early American political discourse’, *Journal of American History*, 89:4 (March 2003), 1295–1330 (quotation at 1296).

Town, South Carolina, of black people echoing white demands for “Liberty” prompted a week of martial law in the city.²⁷

Of course, as the Abbé Raynal warned the ‘nations of Europe’ in the 1776 edition of the hugely influential *Histoire des deux Indes*, ‘your slaves stand in no need either of your generosity or your counsels’ in order to appreciate the lived reality of ‘the sacrilegious yoke of their oppression.’²⁸ The mounting alarm with which mainland colonial slaveholders contemplated ‘the menace of a vast slave population struggling to arm itself’ in the mid-1770s reflected in part their very real conviction that ‘the love of liberty is so natural to us all’.²⁹

But for the enslaved, any ‘attempt to gain our freedom or *natural right*’ directly, and especially by force, was hazardous in the extreme; very often, it was ‘kill or be killed’, as the militant black abolitionist David Walker put it, and it was therefore critical to wait ‘until you see your way clear’.³⁰ John Dunn observes that ‘revolutions are definitionally failures of political control by an existing ruling elite’: they happen ‘only when... the “upper-classes” *cannot carry on in the old way*’.³¹ It was primarily in this sense that the American Revolution facilitated slave resistance, by dividing masters against themselves, disrupting the elaborate mechanisms of

²⁷ ‘Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms’, 6 July 1775, in Julian P. Boyd et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 34 vols. to date (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950–) (cited hereafter as *Jefferson Papers*), 1:217; Peter H. Wood, “‘Liberty is Sweet’: African-American freedom struggles in the years before white independence”, in Alfred F. Young, ed., *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the history of American radicalism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), 159.

²⁸ Guillaume T.F. Raynal, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, tr. J. Justamond, 4 vols. (London, 1776 edn.), 3:172. This and the subsequent passages from Raynal quoted below do not appear in the original version, *Histoire Philosophique et Politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, 6 vols. (Amsterdam, 1770), or the 1774 Amsterdam edition. On the significance of Raynal’s *Histoire* in antislavery discourse, see Davis, *Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 13–21, 417–21; Dubois, *Colony of Citizens*, 64–6.

²⁹ Jeffrey Robert Young, *Domesticating Slavery: The master class in Georgia and South Carolina, 1670–1837* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 72; Wylly to Nepean, 27 September 1789, CO23/29/272. On this point see also Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black culture in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 279.

³⁰ David Walker, *Walker’s Appeal in Four Articles* (3rd edn., Boston, 1830; repr. Bedford, Mass.: Applewood, 2008), 14, 30 (Walker’s emphasis). On this point see also Genovese, *Rebellion to Revolution*, 5–12.

³¹ John Dunn, *Modern Revolutions* (1972; 2nd edn., Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 13; V. I. Lenin, “‘Left-Wing’ Communism, an infantile disorder” (5th edn., Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 68 (Lenin’s emphasis). See also Randall Collins, ‘Maturation of the State-Centred Theory of Revolution and Ideology’, *Sociological Theory*, 11:1 (March 1993), 117–28.

control and repression, and opening up possibilities for novel alliances transcending the normally unyielding lines of race and class.

By 1776, Raynal believed that ‘the Negroes only want a chief, sufficiently courageous, to lead them to vengeance and slaughter’, and from 1775 onwards, thousands of enslaved black people mobilised themselves in the British cause, encouraged by officials and soldiers like Lord Dunmore. As émigrés from the victorious United States in the 1780s, these African Americans would journey around the Atlantic, to Florida, Nova Scotia, London, Sierra Leone, the Caribbean, and the Bahamas. The subsequent histories of all these places would be complicated by their continuing efforts to ensure that this ‘black Loyalist’ diaspora would be one of freedom rather than slavery, and the varying enthusiasm with which the rulers of the British empire supported their aspirations.³²

Although American historians have recognised that their ‘nation was the child, not the father, of our revolution’, this has rarely deterred them from approaching that revolution principally in terms of what Edmund Morgan deemed ‘the central question: How did the United States come into being as a nation dedicated to principles of liberty and equality?’³³ Those principles were, of course, largely framed so as to exclude that ‘motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes and molattoes, Irish teagues and out landish jack tarrs’ who had contributed so much to the revolution. But in the context of a profoundly interconnected Atlantic world, knitted together by the circuitous transoceanic transmission of power, people, and commodities, revolution was not readily restricted to such arbitrary national bounds. The revolutionary crisis quickly overflowed both the newly-restricted meaning of the word ‘America’, and the chronological limits of the Thermidorian ‘repudiation of everything that Americans had fought for’ at Philadelphia in 1787.³⁴

³² Raynal, *History* (1776 edn.), 3:173. On the role of African Americans in the imperial crisis and Revolutionary War, and the ‘black Loyalist’ diaspora, see pp. 57–89 below.

³³ Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic, 1763–89* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 159. See also Karen O’Brien, ‘David Ramsay and the delayed Americanization of American History’, *Early American Literature*, 29:1 (1994), 1–18.

³⁴ John Adams, quoted in Jesse Lemisch, ‘Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant seamen in the politics of Revolutionary America’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 25:3 (July 1968), 399; Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (New York: Knopf, 1972 edn.), 523; see also Peter Linebaugh & Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra. Sailors, slaves, commoners and the hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic* (London: Verso, 2000), 211–14, 236–40.

French and Spanish involvement in the Revolutionary War meant that the conflict's latter phases were played out as much in the Caribbean, another heartland of Atlantic slavery, as in North America. For the French monarchy, the cost of this rare victory over its longstanding British antagonist was to prove disastrous, and ultimately fatal. Meanwhile, freer trade with an independent United States helped fuel a spectacular boom in the greatest Caribbean sugar colony, French Saint-Domingue, encouraging both the autonomist leanings of planters frustrated with their own mercantilist shackles, and the importation of ever greater numbers of enslaved Africans.³⁵

In the 1790s, developments in Europe and the Americas would spectacularly feed back upon one another to result in 'the outbreak of revolution in the heart of Afro-America'. Raynal's call for a 'great man... whom nature, perhaps, owes to the honour of the human species', a 'new Spartacus, who will not find a Crassus', was to find a seemingly uncanny fulfilment in the emergence of Toussaint Louverture, who, along with veterans of the American Revolution such as André Rigaud, orchestrated the destruction of slavery in perhaps its most brutal, and certainly most prosperous setting.³⁶

Around the world, contemporaries were struck by what seemed the unprecedented scope and magnitude of a crisis that was soon referred to as 'an age of Revolutions, in which every thing may be looked for.'³⁷ To describe the bewildering complexity of 'the dynamics of the age, where events did not unfold in a linear

³⁵ Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), esp. 137–237; C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global connections and comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 95–6; David Geggus, 'The Effects of the American Revolution on France and its Empire', in Jack P. Greene & J. R. Pole, eds., *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991), 525–6; David Patrick Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British occupation of Saint Domingue 1793–1798* (Oxford: OUP, 1982), 11, 15–16; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 33; Blackburn, *Making*, 449–51.

³⁶ Julius Sherrard Scott, III, 'The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American communication in the era of the Haitian Revolution', (PhD dissertation, Duke University, 1986), 122; Raynal, *History* (1776 edn.), 3:173. For discussions of the evidence for the involvement of Rigaud and others in the American Revolutionary War see Dubois, *Avengers*, 65–7; Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 22. On the Haitian Revolution generally see also C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938; London: Penguin, 2001 edn.); Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); Thomas O. Ott, *The Haitian Revolution, 1789–1804* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973).

³⁷ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man: Being an answer to Mr. Burke's attack on the French Revolution* (London, 1791), 162; cf. Bayly, *Birth of the Modern World*, 86–8, and also the remarks of Bahamian Loyalist John Wells in 1796, quoted at p. 211 below.

process of gradually or suddenly escalating power but in chaotic patterns that took differing forms in different places’, observers resorted to idioms of natural and elemental force: they spoke of the ‘*tempête révolutionnaire*’ and the ‘Levelling *Influenza*’. Slaveholders especially were quick to apprehend the role in the revolutionary crisis of what the Jamaican legislature termed ‘the ruder Multitudes on This Side of the Western Ocean’, seen later by its Bahamian counterpart as ‘an odious combination of the darkness, ferocity, vices, and superstitions of all colours and all nations.’³⁸

Historians who have sought to depict this ‘Age of Revolution’ as ‘a single revolutionary movement’ have seldom had much to say about slavery in general, or about Haiti in particular. Although purporting to be about ‘the transformation of the world’, Eric Hobsbawm’s *The Age of Revolution* was at least open about the degree to which ‘its perspective is primarily European’.³⁹ But even scholars writing about the ‘Revolutionary era’ of what they termed the ‘Atlantic Civilization’ were largely silent on the subject. On learning that in 1794 ‘France... became the first state in the world to forbid slavery’, and that ‘this measure rallied the Negroes to the French side’, readers of Jacques Godechot’s *France and the Atlantic Revolution* might well be slightly bemused at the revelation that the French had hitherto possessed African slaves, and indeed a colonial empire in the Caribbean.⁴⁰

Inevitably, these were primarily synthetic works, and such ‘formulas of erasure’ were largely a fair reflection of the wider historical literature of the time. This historiography was the product of a world shaped and dominated by European power, whose pervasive, multiple and subtle influences often transcended ‘historians’ claimed

³⁸ Lester D. Langley, *The Americas in the Age of Revolution 1750–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 8; Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973 edn.), 47–9; Council’s Address, enclosure in Governor Williamson to Secretary of State, Jamaica, 30 November 1791, quoted in Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave acculturation and resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1763–1831* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 217 (emphasis in original); *An Official Letter from the Commissioners of Correspondence of the Bahama Islands, to George Chalmers, Esq. Colonial Agent, Concerning the Proposed Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies* (London, 1823), 25.

³⁹ R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A political history of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959–64), 1:4; Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution. Europe 1789–1848* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962), ix.

⁴⁰ Palmer, *Democratic Revolution*, 1:21, 4; Jacques Godechot, *France and the Atlantic Revolution of the Eighteenth Century, 1770–1799*, tr. Herbert H. Rowen (New York: Free Press, 1965), 229–30. For a similar critique of Palmer see Robin Blackburn, ‘Haiti, Slavery, and the Age of the Democratic Revolution’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 63:4 (October 2006), 643–4.

political preferences'.⁴¹ At a time when it could be asserted without qualification that 'the colonization of North America and the republican government of the United States constitute perhaps the greatest, certainly the boldest, enterprises of European mankind', it was easy to assume that both 'the revolution that the world forgot' and 'the brutal modernity of the plantation economy' were 'mere disturbances on the margins of history: an anomaly, a more or less bothersome irregularity in the march of progress and the unfolding of individual liberties'.⁴²

Contemporaries often found it easier to appreciate that, as 'an Englishman and a Man of Humanity' put it in 1789, slavery and empire constituted 'a link... of the commercial chain, that cannot now be broken, without disjoining the whole system which has been forming for this century past, to aggrandize this country beyond any other in Europe'. Academic understanding of the importance of slavery, empire, and the Atlantic to what Hobsbawm called 'the evident progress of eighteenth-century capitalism and civilization' in the 1960s has, since then, grown considerably.⁴³

In recent years, studies of the British and other empires have increasingly proceeded from 'the premise that historians and critics should address metropole and colonies as interrelated analytic fields'. In widely varying ways, they have sought to 'take sufficient account of the impact of developments "out there" on... those "in here,"' not the least important of which was 'the unique, predatory, and ubiquitous presence of slavery in British societies in this period'.⁴⁴

A parallel historiographical current has been the convergence of 'a new form of imperial history' with other developments in the study of slavery, the black diaspora, and colonial American societies, in an approach treating the Atlantic as a

⁴¹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 25–9, 74–107 (quotations at 96, 28).

⁴² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 55; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 71; Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the cultures of slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23, 10.

⁴³ 'Abolition of the Slave Trade', Liverpool, 9 April 1789, in *Bahama Gazette*, 11 July 1789; Hobsbawm, *Age of Revolution*, 238.

⁴⁴ Kathleen Wilson, 'Introduction: histories, empires, modernities', in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1848* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 19, 7–8, 5; see for instance Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994 edn.); C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British empire and the world, 1780–1830* (London: Longman, 1989); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002); Stephen Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (Oxford: OUP, 2000); David Lambert & Alan Lester, eds., *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial careering in the long nineteenth century* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006); James Walvin, ed., *Slavery and British Society 1776–1846* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

‘viable unit of analysis within which we can understand the destruction and emergence of empires, the movement of people, the evolution of new cultural forms, and the circulation of ideas’.⁴⁵ This ‘Atlantic world’ was constituted by the ‘kaleidoscopic movements of people, goods, and ideas’ via ‘interwoven, complex, and multitudinous’ political, economic, and cultural networks, that criss-crossed the ocean and could also ‘protrude deep into the continents of the circum-Atlantic rim’.⁴⁶

A growing number of works exploring the Haitian Revolution’s wider Atlantic impact and significance – in Europe as well as America – have appeared since the 1990s,⁴⁷ and many writers have traced the linkages between the development of the British Atlantic and Britain’s more longstanding revolutionary history.⁴⁸ Indeed, these perspectives would seem to offer a basis for a more satisfactory account of the Age of Revolution as a whole, conveying both the scope of its chaotically dynamic and thoroughly transnational and transcultural trajectories, and the role of empire, slavery, and enslaved people at the heart of the process.

However, the form in which Atlantic history has ‘emerged as a distinct subfield, or even subdiscipline, within the historical profession’ poses considerable obstacles to such an undertaking. It would, inevitably, be a ‘circum-Atlantic history’,

⁴⁵ Bernard Bailyn & Philip D. Morgan, introduction in *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural margins of the first British empire* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 9; Alison Games, ‘Atlantic History: Definitions, challenges, and opportunities’, *American Historical Review*, 111:3 (June 2000), 747.

⁴⁶ David Armitage & Michael J. Braddick, introduction in *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 1; Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and contours* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 84; David Armitage, ‘Three Concepts of Atlantic History’, in Armitage & Braddick, eds., *British Atlantic World*, 26.

⁴⁷ David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus, eds., *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); David P. Geggus, ed., *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001); Dubois, *Colony of Citizens*; Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*; Doris L. Garraway, ed., *Tree of Liberty: Cultural Legacies of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008); Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the radical Enlightenment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008); David Patrick Geggus & Norman Fiering, eds., *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2009). In this respect, Scott, ‘The Common Wind’, was a pioneering historical study.

⁴⁸ See for instance Linebaugh & Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*; Angus Calder, *Revolutionary Empire: The rise of the English-speaking empires from the fifteenth century to the 1780s* (1981; rev. edn., London: Pimlico, 1998); Christopher Hill, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution: A social and economic history of Britain, 1530–1780* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 1967); J. C. D. Clark, ‘Revolution in the English Atlantic Empire, 1660–1800’, in E. E. Rice, ed., *Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 27–94; Eliga H. Gould, ‘Revolution and Counter-Revolution’, in Armitage & Braddick, eds., *British Atlantic World*, 196–213.

an approach that ‘remains the most challenging enterprise for Atlantic historians.’⁴⁹ There is a widespread feeling that the Atlantic world is a ‘system of networks’ that are ‘so complex, so numerous, that they can only be illustrated, not catalogued, enumerated, or fully summarized’, or at least that ‘the time is not ripe for a comprehensive treatment of Atlantic history in its fullest sense’.⁵⁰

The belief that future developments in Atlantic history ‘will be archival, not synthetic’ of course reflects a more general historiographical trend away from the kind of integrative, overarching studies attempted by Hobsbawm, Palmer and Godechot.⁵¹ For scholars influenced by postcolonialism, there is, perhaps, a particular ambivalence about the ‘Age of Revolution’, with its intimate connections to ‘the political and epistemological models of Enlightenment and modernist Europe’ that are widely seen to have facilitated the hegemony of ‘a Eurocentric particularism parading as universalism’.⁵² The revolutionary crisis also coincided with the emergence of a black Atlantic perspective emphasising ‘conceptions of modernity... founded on the catastrophic rupture of the middle passage rather than the dream of revolutionary transformation’, and nowadays even the most radical thinkers are prone to accept that ‘even if we wished to bring these narratives together, it would be impossible.’⁵³

Some historians have indeed questioned the overall significance of revolution for antislavery and slave resistance, partly in reaction to Eugene Genovese’s *From Rebellion to Revolution*. Genovese’s teleological take on Marxism certainly looked rather like an attempt ‘to universalize Eurocentric historical experience to the rest of the world’, not least in terms of its preoccupation with securing ‘a place in the modern system of nation-states’ as the defining characteristic of the Haitian Revolution’s

⁴⁹ Armitage, ‘Three Concepts’, 12–13, 16–18; Games, ‘Definitions, challenges, and opportunities’, 747; the concept of a ‘circum-Atlantic world’ was outlined in Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), esp. 4–6.

⁵⁰ Bailyn, *Concept and contours*, 84–6; Armitage & Braddick, introduction in *British Atlantic World*, 4.

⁵¹ Games, ‘Definitions, challenges, and opportunities’, 754; Interesting recent departures in this direction, produced, notably, from hemispheric or global perspectives, include Langley, *Americas in the Age of Revolution*; Bayly, *Birth of the Modern World*, 86–120.

⁵² Wilson, ‘Introduction’ in *New Imperial History*, 1; Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*, 24; cf. Doris L. Garraway, “‘*Légitime Défense*’: Universalism and nationalism in the discourse of the Haitian Revolution”, in Garraway, ed., *Tree of Liberty*, 63–7; Michel Foucault, ‘Useless to Revolt?’, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984 III: Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, tr. Robert Hurley & others (London: Allen Lane, 2001), 447–53.

⁵³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London Verso, 1993), 1–71, 195–201 (quotation at 197); Linebaugh & Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 333–4.

modernity.⁵⁴ However, attempts at establishing an alternative trajectory of ‘phases of resistance and acculturation’ driven by primarily internal dynamics have often seemed equally schematic and over-generalised.⁵⁵ Arguments that ‘abstract European ideas stood little chance of gaining general currency among Caribbean slaves’ rely on a rather narrow conception of revolutionary influence, defined in terms of the normative status of such discourses. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued, the ‘the key tenets of the political philosophy that became explicit in Saint-Domingue/Haiti’ were necessarily expounded in the first instance by ‘victorious practice’ precisely because their radicalism transcended that of the European Enlightenment.⁵⁶ In any case, it seems increasingly clear that slaves’ ‘wonderfull Art of communicating Intelligence among themselves’, that could ‘run severall hundreds of Miles in a Week or Fortnight’ over land and sea, played a key role in the proliferation of revolutionary influences.⁵⁷

It will probably come as little surprise that I generally find more convincing the work of those scholars who have sought to present the new challenges to slavery that developed from the 1770s in terms of the broader revolutionary crisis, doing so very much in Atlantic terms well before this became ‘all the rage’.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, such treatments were principally concerned with, and derive much of their narrative force and momentum from, the demonstration of how and why it became possible, as it apparently had not been before, for such challenges to succeed.⁵⁹ But, as sceptics have often observed, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that revolution could also present opportunities for slaveholders to consolidate or extend their sway. Whatever

⁵⁴ Wilson, ‘Introduction’ in *New Imperial History*, 1; Genovese, *Rebellion to Revolution*, 4. By 1983, Genovese, with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, was finding it ‘hard to resist seeing in Joseph Stalin a man who combined Toussaint’s vision with Dessalines’ savage ruthlessness’: see *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and bourgeois property in the rise and expansion of capitalism* (Oxford: OUP, 1983), 411.

⁵⁵ Mullin, *Africa in America*, 275; cf. Craton, *Testing the Chains*. For a critical assessment of both Genovese’s approach and Craton’s ‘reified cultural constructs’ see David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 55–68 (quotation at 65).

⁵⁶ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 163; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 88.

⁵⁷ L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), entry for 24 September 1775, 2:182; on subaltern capacities for the circum-Atlantic circulation of information, experience and individuals see Scott, ‘The Common Wind’; idem, ‘Crisscrossing Empires: Ships, sailors, and resistance in the Lesser Antilles in the eighteenth century’, in Robert L. Paquette and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 128–43; W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African-American seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1–43; Linebaugh & Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 143–247; Dubois, *Colony of Citizens*, 89–93.

⁵⁸ Games, ‘Definitions, challenges, and opportunities’, 746.

⁵⁹ See especially Davis, *Age of Revolution*; Scott, ‘The Common Wind’; Blackburn, *Overthrow*.

terminal date one prefers for the Age of Revolution, there is no doubt that Atlantic slavery emerged from it very much alive. If slaveholding henceforth had to be defended and justified in a more active way than previously, revolution had also furnished new instruments for undertaking those tasks.⁶⁰

As David Brion Davis observes, ‘if the American Revolution could not solve the problem of slavery, it at least led to a *perception* of the problem.’ Given that ‘the legal and moral validity of slavery’ had been ‘a troublesome question in European thought from the time of Aristotle’, it might be more accurate to say that the Atlantic revolutionary crisis made the problem impossible to ignore.⁶¹ But further, it led people to think that a solution was *possible*, even necessary, and to act accordingly.

The nature of this solution, however, remained very much in the balance as the final ‘battle’ of the American Revolution was being fought in Nassau.⁶² Was it to take the form of a defiant insistence that ‘slavery is *right*, and ought to be extended’; or of a metropolitan act of ‘econocide’; or would the new Spartacus ‘lift up the sacred standard of liberty’ with ‘fire and sword’ as he ‘avenged America’? These questions could only be resolved in the years to come, in the playing out of a series of distinct but intersecting struggles, waged in places such as the United States, Britain, Saint-Domingue, and in a ‘hitherto obscure Colony’ called the Bahama Islands.⁶³

⁶⁰ These issues are strongly emphasised in Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: a history of slavery and antislavery* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), 120–27, 163–76; see also idem, ‘The Limits of Example’, in Geggus, ed., *Impact of the Haitian Revolution*, 10–15.

⁶¹ Davis, *Age of Revolution*, 285 (emphasis in original); Davis, *Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 13.

⁶² James A. Lewis, *The Final Campaign of the American Revolution: Rise and fall of the Spanish Bahamas* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

⁶³ Abraham Lincoln, Inaugural Address, 4 March 1861, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953–5), 4:268–9 (emphasis in original); Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British slavery in the era of abolition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977); Raynal, *History*, rev. edn., 8 vols. (London, 1783), 5:309; Proclamation by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, April 1804, quoted in Dubois, *Avengers*, 301; Petition enclosed in Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 29 February 1788, CO23/27/102.

II: Bahamian Histories

The Bahamas archipelago, situated between the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, is a 200 mile wide chain of islands stretching down southeastward on a course roughly parallel to the northern coast of Cuba for a length of nearly 600 miles, from the straits of Florida to within a hundred miles of Hispaniola, and roughly bisected by the Tropic of Cancer. Although there are as many as 2,700 islands and cays within a sea area of 100,000 square miles, the total land area is less than 6,000 square miles, 86 percent of which is contained within the nine largest islands.⁶⁴ (see map at p. 309).

Humans first reached the Bahamas no later than 600CE, and the roots of modern Bahamian society stretch back to the arrival of settlers of English and African descent in the mid-seventeenth century.⁶⁵ For most of its existence, that society has been characterised by underdevelopment, marginality, and a chronic poverty punctuated by sporadic bursts of fortuitous and short-lived prosperity.

Until relatively recently, the development of historical writing about the Bahamas might be said to have largely mirrored this pattern.⁶⁶ A few episodes were deemed noteworthy, such as Christopher Columbus's first landfall in the New World, and the islands' central role in the heyday of Atlantic piracy. But even these fleeting moments of interest were usually deemed the stuff of dramatic stories and colourful anecdotes, rather than the material of serious study. From the perspective of a history concerned principally with the rise and fall of nations and empires and the deeds and thoughts of great men, the Bahamas generally seemed to have little to offer. For nineteenth-century writers, the three centuries following the arrival of Columbus were a period in which 'these islands had continued almost in a desert state', a casual assessment that served as both a statement and explanation of Bahamian insignificance.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:4–9; see also Neil E. Sealey, *Bahamian Landscapes: An introduction to the geography of the Bahamas* (London: Collins, 1985).

⁶⁵ On the pre-Columbian Bahamians, now usually known as Lucayans, see Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:3–59; Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 1–15.

⁶⁶ For a survey of Bahamian historiography see Michael Craton, 'Historiography of the Bahamas, Turks and Caicos Islands, Cayman Islands and Belize', in B. W. Higman, ed., *General History of the Caribbean*, VI: *Methodology and Historiography of the Caribbean* (London: UNESCO/ Macmillan, 1999), 665–86.

⁶⁷ Daniel McKinnen, *A Tour Through the British West Indies, in the Years 1802 and 1803, giving a particular account of the Bahama Islands* (London, 1804), 152.

Bahamian historiography remained a sparse and patchy field well into the second half of the twentieth century. In the face of a blatantly Anglocentric colonial education system and the absence of higher academic institutions, the most substantial contributions generally came from outsiders. Their interest in the Bahamas was usually derived from the pursuit of relatively obscure facets of other, better established histories.⁶⁸

It probably did not help matters that the Bahamas were so long the domain of an imperial history within which their significance more or less paralleled their status within the British empire: by the mid-nineteenth century, a marginal part of a marginal region, at most a place of comfortable quasi-exile where inconvenient but important personages might be safely ignored.⁶⁹

The end of the colonial relationship with Britain and achievement of national independence helped to catalyse what Prime Minister Lynden Pindling described in 1975 as Bahamians' 'deeply felt need... to gain some knowledge of their ancient and historic roots'.⁷⁰ To some degree, perhaps, the absence of the kind of protracted struggle for independence that might have provided a political basis for a distinct Bahamian national identity gave greater urgency to efforts to identify a valid source of nationalism in cultural and historical fields. At any rate, the 1970s saw the start of a new wave of historical writing on the Bahamas. This work, very much informed by the dramatic shifts in scholarly approaches to the study of slavery and imperialism in the New World, and the emergence of the new social history, sought to reorient Bahamian history towards the experience of the non-white and enslaved people who

⁶⁸ On early Bahamian historiography see Craton, 'Historiography', 665–86; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders* 1:397, n. 1; Paul Albury, 'A Short History of the Bahamas Historical Society', *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society*, 6:1 (October 1984), 3–6. The deficiencies of the colonial-era school system are discussed in Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, vii–viii.

⁶⁹ Most notoriously Edward, Duke of Windsor, former king-emperor and fascist sympathiser, who was governor of the Bahamas from 1940–45: see Michael Craton, *A History of the Bahamas* (London: Collins, 1968 edn.), 272–4; Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933–39* (Oxford: OUP, 1983), 271–4.

⁷⁰ Lynden Pindling, introduction to Paul Albury, *The Story of the Bahamas* (London: Macmillan, 1975), ix.

constituted the great majority of Bahamians, both in the present, and for most of the colonial period.⁷¹

Surely the most substantial and impressive product of this new Bahamian historiography has been Michael Craton and Gail Saunders' two volume *Islanders in the Stream*. Subtitled 'a history of the Bahamian people', *Islanders* sought to offer Bahamians 'an authentic social history, one that will search, feel, and declare the true bedrock, roots, and groundswell of their special identity, and thus help to protect it for the future.' Craton and Saunders identify the unique archipelagic geography of the Bahamas, specifically 'the ubiquity of the sea and its hugely greater determining influence when compared with the land and its meager resources', as the primary influence on the islands' history. They endeavour to trace the ways in which Bahamians have creatively responded to the 'common environmental and ecological factors that encouraged migrants... to forge distinctively Bahamian creole variants of their original cultures.'⁷²

The result is a self-conscious emphasis, even in the face of such ostensibly radical breaks as the genocidal depopulation of the 'indigenous' Lucayans, upon what are deemed the essential continuities of Bahamian history. That history is presented largely as a process of 'demographic and cultural evolution', principally driven by internal dynamics. Craton and Saunders are certainly aware of the wider regional and imperial backdrops against which their story unfolds, but these perspectives serve for the most part only to provide a general context and a comparative frame for the exposition of Bahamian distinctiveness.⁷³

Most other recent scholarship has followed a similar approach. Howard Johnson has made effective use of concepts from Caribbean historiography, most

⁷¹ See for instance Michael Craton, 'Hobbesian or Panglossian? The two extremes of slave conditions in the British Caribbean, 1783 to 1834', *WMQ* 3rd ser., 35:2 (April, 1978), 324–56; idem, 'Changing Patterns of Slave Family in the British West Indies', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 10 (Summer 1979), 1–35 (these articles are reprinted in *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, 203–32, 233–59; subsequent references are to the latter book); Gail Saunders, *Slavery in the Bahamas, 1648–1838* (1985; Nassau: Nassau Guardian, 2000 edn.); idem, *Bahamian Loyalists and their Slaves* (London: Macmillan, 1983); idem, 'Slave Life, Slave Society and Cotton Production in the Bahamas', *Slavery and Abolition*, 2:3 (December 1990), 332–50; Howard Johnson, *The Bahamas in Slavery and Freedom* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1991); idem, *The Bahamas from Slavery to Servitude, 1783–1933* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996); idem, 'Slave Life and Leisure in Nassau, 1783–1838', *Slavery and Abolition*, 16:1 (April 1995), 45–64; idem, 'A Slow & Extended Abolition: The case of the Bahamas 1800–38', in Mary Turner, ed., *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: The dynamics of labour bargaining in the Americas* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1995), 165–81.

⁷² Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:xxii, xx.

⁷³ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:xxii, xvii–xxiii.

notably Sidney Mintz's formulation of the transition to 'proto-peasantry' among Jamaican slaves in the nineteenth century. But if anything, Johnson stresses continuity and downplays external influences even more than Craton and Saunders.⁷⁴ In his work, even the significance of formal slavery's abolition in the 1830s is circumscribed by an argument for the extent to which 'the evolution of new arrangements for slave labour... prefigured post-emancipation labour systems.'⁷⁵

Especially in the last decade or so, plantation excavations have yielded fresh insights into Bahamian slavery. Drawing on sociological and anthropological perspectives, archaeologists such as Laurie A. Wilkie and Paul Farnsworth have sought to explore how enslaved people used material culture to construct their identities, and in particular to maintain and reformulate African cultural legacies.⁷⁶ But thus far, this work has refined and complemented the historical perspective, rather than drastically revising it. Indeed, its focus upon detailed investigations of specific slaveholdings has, if anything, served to reinforce the turn towards a locally-oriented social history.

The fruits of this turn have been considerable. It has produced a far richer understanding of the experience of enslavement in the Bahamas, and in the process has yielded a fuller appreciation of the extent of Bahamian distinctiveness. But a tendency towards 'de-eventalization' was an implicit corollary of the turn towards a kind of social history that aimed at 'transcending the individual and the particular

⁷⁴ Howard Johnson, 'The Emergence of a Peasantry in the Bahamas during slavery', *Slavery and Abolition*, 10:2 (September 1989), 172–86; a revised version of this material appears in *Slavery to Servitude*, 47–61. On 'proto-peasantry' see Sidney W. Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations* (1974; New Brunswick: Aldine, 2007 edn.), 132–4. The term was previously applied to Bahamian slavery in Craton, 'Hobbesian or Panglossian?'; see *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, 231.

⁷⁵ Johnson, 'Slow & Extended Abolition', 165; see more generally Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 1–61.

⁷⁶ See for instance Laurie A. Wilkie & Paul Farnsworth, *Sampling Many Pots: An archaeology of memory and tradition at a Bahamian plantation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005); Paul Farnsworth, 'The Influence of Trade on Bahamian Slave Culture', *Historical Archaeology*, 30:4 (1996), 1–23; idem, 'Beer Brewing and Consumption in the Maintenance of African Identity by the Enslaved People of the Bahamas, 1783–1834', *Culture and Agriculture*, 23:2 (Summer 2001), 19–30; Laurie A. Wilkie, 'Trade and the Construction of Bahamian Identity: A multiscalar exploration', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 3:4 (1999), 283–320; idem, 'Culture Bought: Evidence of creolization in the consumer goods of an enslaved Bahamian family', *Historical Archaeology*, 34:3 (2000), 10–26.

event' by an emphasis on environment, continuity and the long durée.⁷⁷ This work has largely concentrated on slavery in the nineteenth century, for which there is far more substantial evidence than earlier periods, especially the sort of quantitative data required for the cliometric techniques used by Craton and Saunders.⁷⁸

The problem is that a great deal of what is so distinctive about nineteenth-century Bahamian society – a black majority living mainly on the Out Islands within a 'decayed plantation system', who exercised substantial control over their own lives and labour in the context of formal slavery and the dominance of an aggressively racist 'agrocommercial bourgeoisie'⁷⁹ – is scarcely in evidence, if at all, prior to the 1780s. The period between 1783 and roughly 1800 saw profound demographic, economic, social, political and cultural changes that touched upon virtually all aspects of Bahamian life to a greater or lesser extent. Even the supposedly constant influence of geography did not emerge unaltered; before 1783, only five islands in the archipelago had any substantial human population. By the nineteenth century, settlement had been extended hundreds of miles to the southeast, encompassing at least eight additional islands.⁸⁰

Older Bahamian historiography had a straightforward explanation for these developments. They were the work of the Loyalist émigrés who came to the islands in the 1780s in the wake of the American Revolution. Up to the mid-twentieth century, these people were routinely portrayed as 'sturdy pioneers and political organizers', who 'were culturally and socially superior to the native-born Bahamians'. With their 'driving ambitions to re-make their fortunes and to assume positions of leadership in

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, 'Questions of Method', in *Power*, 228; Fernand Braudel, quoted in Stuart Clark, 'The *Annales* Historians', in Quentin Skinner, ed., *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: CUP, 1985), 179. Although not explicitly acknowledged, the influence of Braudel seems readily apparent in *Islanders in the Stream*. Cf. Ira Berlin's critique of the 'essentially static vision of slave culture' in many of the seminal studies of slavery in the United States, in 'Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America', *American Historical Review*, 85:1 (February 1980), 44.

⁷⁸ See Craton, 'Hobbesian or Panglossian?'; 'Changing Patterns of Slave Family', and especially Saunders, *Slavery in the Bahamas*.

⁷⁹ Saunders, *Slavery in the Bahamas*, 94; Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 98.

⁸⁰ See Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:180, Table 3.

the government', the 'invigorating arrival of the Loyalists' was held to have inaugurated 'the modern era of the history of the Bahamas'.⁸¹

Such depictions 'of a rather splendid era controlled by a well-born and gentle-blooded people' bore a notable resemblance to the Loyalists' own view of things; they also provided a convenient foundation myth for their descendants in the white oligarchy that dominated Bahamian life until the mid-twentieth century.⁸²

Since the power of the 'Bay Street Boys' was undermined by the 'quiet revolution' of the 1960s, Bahamian historians have increasingly distanced themselves from the 'self-propagated myth that the White Loyalists totally transformed the Bahamas'.⁸³ In part, they have done this by arguing that 'the Loyalists were as much transformed by the Bahamas as vice versa'.⁸⁴ Of course, if the émigrés changed a great deal in adapting to the Bahamas – as they undoubtedly did – this leaves room for the Bahamas themselves to have altered considerably as well. Essentially, this well-worn formulation is a way of avoiding the issue of discontinuity. Although sometimes conceding that what was 'in many respects a vital qualitative as well as quantitative change' occurred in the 1780s and 1790s, the new Bahamian historiography has given much more attention to the nineteenth century, when the results of this change were a point of departure rather than a focus of investigation in their own right.

⁸¹ Wilbur H. Siebert, 'The Dispersion of the American Tories', *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 1:2 (September 1914), 197; A. Deans Peggs, *A Short History of the Bahamas* (Nassau: Deans Peggs Research Fund, 1959), 18; Thelma Peters, 'The American Loyalists and the Plantation Period in the Bahama Islands' (PhD dissertation, University of Florida, 1960), 51; Wallace Brown, *The Good Americans: The Loyalists in the American Revolution* (New York: William Morrow, 1969), 220. See also Thelma Peters, 'The Loyalist Migration from East Florida to the Bahamas Islands', *FHQ*, 40:2 (October 1961), 123–41; idem, 'The American Loyalists in the Bahamas Islands: Who They Were', *FHQ*, 40:3 (January 1962), 226–40.

⁸² H. Maclachlan Bell, *Bahamas: Isles of June* (London, c.1934), 50. In a scathing and brilliant dissection of the Bay Street regime, Gordon Lewis observed in 1968 that the Bahamas 'have been influenced, overwhelmingly, by the traditional colonial English way of life brought over by the Loyalist refugees fleeing the American Revolution, with its sense of property amid the psychology of Southern slavery'. *The Growth of the Modern West Indies* (1968; new edn., Kingston: Ian Randle, 2004), 324.

⁸³ Michael Craton, 'Loyalists Mainly to Themselves: The "Black Loyalist" diaspora to the Bahamas, 1783–c.1820', in Verene A. Shepherd, ed., *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives from the Caribbean, Africa and the African diaspora* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2002), 44. On the Bahamian transition to majority rule and independence during the 1960s and 1970s, see Doris L. Johnson, *The Quiet Revolution in the Bahamas* (Nassau: Family Islands Press, 1972); Colin A. Hughes, *Race and Politics in the Bahamas* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 95–194; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, II, *From the ending of slavery to the twenty-first century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 316–62.

⁸⁴ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:xx; cf. Michael Craton, 'Hopetown and Hard Bargain: the Loyalist transformation in the Bahamas', in Ralph Bennett, ed., *Settlements in the Americas: Cross-cultural perspectives* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1993), 252; Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 162; Peters, 'American Loyalists and the Plantation Period', 52.

Craton and Saunders freely acknowledge that ‘in principle, we have rejected the history of successive governors and other prominent individuals, partisan squabbles, wars, and laws, in favor of general social themes.’⁸⁵ So too have most of their colleagues. This has meant that in recent years, new research on the consequences of the late eighteenth-century migrations has been largely the preserve of writers who still present the Loyalists on their own terms, as ‘brave and industrious planters’ or ‘the eighteenth-century version of the seventeenth-century Plymouth Pilgrims’.⁸⁶ This study aims to provide a fuller account of how and why the Bahamas changed in the last decades of the eighteenth century. It seeks to rescue those changes from the old narrative of Loyalist agency, without downplaying or marginalising their very real significance for Bahamian history.

⁸⁵ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:xxi.

⁸⁶ Riley, *Homeward Bound* (1983), back cover; Johnson, *Race Relations* (2000), xix.

III: Methods, Sources, and Chapter Outline

The Loyalists certainly did seek to reshape Bahamian society in a certain way, and from their arrival in the islands, they tried very hard to accomplish this. In approaching the Loyalists' agenda for the Bahamas, I have found it very useful to think in terms of the distinction between 'societies with slaves' and 'slave societies' that Ira Berlin and others have applied to the study of Atlantic slavery. In this formula, slave societies, are those where 'slavery stood at the center of economic production,... the master-slave relationship provided the model for all social relations', and slaveholders constituted the ruling class. By contrast, in societies with slaves, slavery existed alongside other modes of labour and subordination, and 'slaves were marginal to the central productive processes'. The development of societies with slaves into slave societies was generally driven by the use of slave labour to produce highly-profitable, exportable commodities. Slaveholders thereby came to dominate the economy and establish their social and political hegemony, as had occurred in the American South and much of the Caribbean from the mid-seventeenth century onwards.⁸⁷

At the start of the 1780s, the Bahamas was a society with slaves; the Loyalists, who predominantly originated in Georgia and South Carolina, sought to build a plantation slave society in the islands, and to establish themselves as a plantocratic ruling class. But, as Berlin notes, while 'some societies with slaves passed rapidly into slave societies... others moved slowly and imperfectly through the transformation',

⁸⁷ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The first two centuries of slavery in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8–10; the concept of 'slave societies' is partly drawn from studies of ancient Greek and Roman slavery: see Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (1980; expanded edn., Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1998), esp. 145–54; Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge: CUP, 1978), 99–100. Cf. the category of 'large-scale slave systems... in which the social structure was decisively dependent on the institution of slavery' described in Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 353–64.

On the so-called 'plantation revolutions' of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries see Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The rise of the planter class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972); Richard B. Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery: An economic history of the British West Indies, 1623–1775* (1974; repr. Kingston: Canoe Press, 2000), 128–47; Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Knopf, 1974); Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The ordeal of colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975), 295–337; Anthony S. Parent, jr., *Foul Means: The formation of a slave society in Virginia, 1660–1740* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Winthrop P. Jordan, *White over Black: American attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 44–98; Blackburn, *Making*; David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The rise and fall of slavery in the New World* (New York: OUP, 2006), 77–140.

while ‘yet other societies with slaves never completed the transition’.⁸⁸ In some respects, the Loyalists did not manage to fulfill their agenda for the Bahamas at all, and in others their success was temporary at best. They failed because there were multiple actors and influences at work, operating in directions that were sometimes tangential to, and sometimes in direct opposition to the Loyalists’ goals. They interacted in complex and contingent ways, to produce an outcome that cannot be wholly ascribed to any single set of protagonists or factors.

This process was manifestly *not* a closed dynamic, internal to the Bahamas. The catalyst for it, of course, was the massive and relatively sudden influx of African Americans and Loyalists from 1783. But throughout the period, a succession of further new arrivals repeatedly shifted the balance of forces, introduced new players, and altered the terms of contestation. Lord Dunmore’s appointment as governor of the Bahamas in 1787 would throw the Loyalists on to the defensive; from the 1790s, a second group of black émigrés entered the scene and threatened to change the rules of the game altogether.

What these external irruptions had in common was their revolutionary origin: Loyalists, African Americans and Dunmore were displaced by American independence, while ‘French Negroes’ appeared in the Bahamas as a result of the Haitian and French Revolutions. The consequences of revolution were mainly transmitted to the Bahamas via Atlantic imperial networks: the crisis of the British empire in North America propelled the émigrés of the 1780s to the islands. In the following decade, the circum-Caribbean once again became the cockpit of a war that was both imperial and revolutionary, and so made the Haitian Revolution an immediate problem – or opportunity – for Bahamians.

Nonetheless, the influence of revolution was far from straightforward. Its implications could be very different, even contradictory. The American Revolution, for example, on the one hand facilitated Loyalist efforts to establish plantation slavery in the Bahamas. On the other, it introduced thousands of African Americans who had spent years trying to get out of the Southern slave regime, and whose status, in the wake of British efforts to disrupt Southern slavery, remained decidedly ambiguous.

Telling this story is largely a matter of taking relatively familiar elements and recontextualising them to cast them in a different light. At one level, it involves

⁸⁸ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 10.

juxtaposing events in the Bahamas with the histories of slavery and the American and Haitian Revolutions. In the Bahamas, it necessitates tracing out a pattern of complex connections and intersections between economic and political developments and the efforts of both free and unfree black people to control their own lives within the context of slavery. That the full extent of these connections has rarely been appreciated owes something to an approach to social history that largely failed to challenge the assumption that politics, and even the economy, were the domain of the white elite. Ironically, establishing the lives of non-white people as a valid field of historical enquiry in its own right has perpetuated the obfuscation of their role in shaping Bahamian society as a whole.⁸⁹

Addressing this issue has not been made any easier by the prevalence of source material produced by elite, slaveholding Loyalists; their voluminous newspapers, memorials, pamphlets and correspondence are an invaluable resource, but one that inevitably prioritises what its authors did and thought.

The most problematic Loyalist sources, however, are not those that merely reflect their producers' perspectives, but those proffering ready made and seductively intelligible accounts of what was happening in the Bahamas. This is especially the case with William Wylly's 1789 *Short Account of the Bahama Islands*. Wylly was a veteran of the Georgia King's Rangers, who initially went to New Brunswick at the end of the Revolutionary War, before becoming a cotton planter in the Bahamas in the mid-1780s. He was also an English-trained lawyer and King's Counsel, and from 1787 was briefly Bahamian Solicitor General, before quarrelling with the Chief Justice and Governor Dunmore. In virtually everything Wylly wrote about the Bahamas in this period, he was arguing the case of Loyalist slaveholders against their opponents, most often Dunmore and his supporters. The *Short Account* was explicitly written as part of an unsuccessful effort to persuade London to recall the governor.⁹⁰

It is also the only printed account of the conflict between Dunmore and the Loyalists, and its status among Bahamian historians has been analogous to its author's

⁸⁹ Cf. the discussion of the increasing fragmentation of the historiography of slavery and its destruction in the nineteenth-century American South into all-but mutually exclusive sub-genres of social and political history in William W. Freehling, *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War* (New York: OUP, 1994), 253–74.

⁹⁰ Wylly, *Short Account*, prefatory advertisement; on Wylly's background see Parrish, 'Records', 477–8; Lorenzo Sabine, *Biographical Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution*, ed. Gregory Palmer (1847; new edn., Wesport: Meckler, 1984), 951–2; for his conflict with Dunmore, see chapter four below.

reputation as ‘the most popular Man in the Government.’⁹¹ Lydia Austin Parrish chose to ‘quote freely from this book as I know of no other that is more reliable’. A more recent study described Wylly, preposterously, as ‘conscientious, credible and non-partisan’. Other writers have acknowledged the ‘obvious animus in Wylly’s account’, but in practice place a similarly uncritical reliance on it.⁹²

By all accounts Wylly was a highly-accomplished lawyer, and he was generally careful to avoid specific, verifiable untruths. Where statements of concrete fact can be extracted from his writing and checked against other sources, they usually turn out to be correct. But Wylly also used all the tricks of his trade to spin the facts to the best possible effect. At times, he could bend the truth a long way, especially when writing, as in the *Short Account*, for an audience without firsthand knowledge of the Bahamas.

To give one example, Wylly claimed that by 1789, the political conflicts in the colony were ‘between the Governor, Council and Assembly (who form a most oppressive and contemptible oligarchy) on the one side, and *every man who dares think for himself*, on the other’. This formula manages to directly suggest – but not quite explicitly state – that Bahamians were overwhelmingly united against Dunmore. *Islanders in the Stream* then claims, without this equivocation, that Dunmore’s conduct had the effect of ‘uniting all local whites in a party against his government’.⁹³ The trouble is that, as will be shown below, this is simply untrue; throughout his governorship, Dunmore enjoyed substantial popularity and political support among non-elite, non-Loyalist native Bahamians.⁹⁴ Nonetheless, as will be apparent, I have drawn on Wylly quite extensively in what follows, principally for evidence of Loyalist attitudes to the Bahamas, to slavery and to Dunmore. But I have tried to approach him critically, with an appreciation that he is a thoroughly partisan source, and, whenever possible, without giving his claims the benefit of the doubt.

⁹¹ Memorial of Thomas Atwood, c. September 1791, CO23/31/234; as a justice of the Bahamian general court, Atwood issued a warrant for Wylly’s arrest in April 1788. Later suspended from his position by Dunmore and prosecuted by Wylly, by 1791 he was imprisoned for debt in England, and pleading with Whitehall for back payments of his salary.

⁹² Parrish, ‘Records’, 34; Michael John Prokopow, “‘To the Torrid Zones’: the Fortunes and Misfortunes of American Loyalists in the Anglo-Caribbean Basin, 1774–1801” (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1996), 291; Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 174.

⁹³ Wylly, *Short Account*, 15 (Wylly’s emphasis); Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:200.

⁹⁴ See pp. 215–6, 228–30 below.

That the Loyalists' outlook has continued to find an echo in modern Bahamian historiography is partly a consequence of the limited interest in the politics of the period in recent times. In shifting their research interests to social history, Bahamian historians have left themselves still heavily reliant on the older literature that was more instinctively sympathetic to the white émigrés. But it also reflects the very real unevenness of the sources. The people who opposed the Loyalists, or who were the targets of their criticism, such as non-whites and 'conch' Bahamian whites were, for the most part, far less concerned, and far less able, to produce direct traces of their perspectives in their own words, and if they did, they were less likely to be preserved.⁹⁵

Where possible, I have sought to compare Loyalist accounts with those of their opponents, but it rarely is possible. In the main, such people have to be approached not through what they said, but through their actions. And even they usually have to be teased out of a disparate assortment of evidence produced by other people. As well as Loyalist sources, I have made considerable use of various colonial records – governors' despatches, reports, official documents, statutes, a smattering of court records, and the journals of the Bahamian Assembly.

Much of this is relatively well-known material, such as Class 23 of the Colonial Office papers at the National Archives in London, but it also includes a lot of previously under-utilised sources. George Chalmers, colonial agent for the Bahamas from 1792–1823, left an enormous collection of papers, including a great deal of correspondence with Bahamians and other pertinent documents, which is now scattered between various repositories on both sides of the Atlantic.⁹⁶ In the Bahamas, the surviving record books of the colonial Registry Office, held by the Registrar General's Department, contain a wealth of documentary evidence that has gone largely untapped for decades. I have also gleaned information from sources that are well known in other contexts, such as Bryan Edwards' *History of the West Indies* and

⁹⁵ The only known letter from a Bahamian slave, Caesar Brown, written in 1800 to Sophia Brown, the daughter of his late owner, entreating her to honour her parents' 'promise to make me free at their death', is at New York Historical Society, Brown Family Correspondence, folder 4.

⁹⁶ Chalmers was a Scottish-born Loyalist who left Maryland for London in 1785. As well as lobbying for government compensation to Loyalists, he wrote a history of the American Revolution, and was appointed chief clerk to the Committee of Council for Trade and Plantations in 1786. See Alexander Du Toit, 'Chalmers, George (*bap.* 1792, *d.* 1825)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (OUP, 2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/5028>>, accessed 9 September 2011.

Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, as well as parliamentary reports and British and American newspapers.

Eighteenth-century quantitative evidence has been surprisingly neglected in Bahamian historiography considering the emphasis on such sources for the nineteenth century. In the case of demography, this is probably because of the difficulty of the material, which is dispersed between different sources, and presented in bewilderingly disparate ways. Study of Bahamian manumission records, on the other hand, has been limited by the incompleteness of the main source for this period, and I was very fortunate in this respect to find an alternative version of the same document in the Bahamas Department of Archives.⁹⁷ While I have made considerable use of this data, especially the latter, I have tried to do so in conjunction with parallel qualitative sources whenever possible, and to avoid over-interpreting it. For certain kinds of evidence, such as runaway slave advertisements, I have concluded that quantification is largely inappropriate in the Bahamian context.⁹⁸

Evidence for what was happening on the Out Islands in this period is notably limited, which goes some way towards explaining why most accounts of the Loyalist plantation economy pass so directly and swiftly from its inception to its decline. I have largely avoided trying to fill this gap by referring to the substantially richer nineteenth-century material, which includes the only extant Bahamian plantation journal and slave narrative.⁹⁹ Unfortunately, the context of such accounts, written long after the decline of the eighteenth-century cotton economy, is so different as to be misleadingly anachronistic. In part, I have tried to address this problem by piecing together some unfamiliar or wholly new sources, such as the reports of Anglican missionaries, and a unique letter, written in 1796 by a semi-literate English overseer on Long Island. But I have also drawn on studies of the plantation system of the eighteenth-century South Carolina and Georgia lowcountry from whence most of the

⁹⁷ This material is discussed in more detail at pp. 173–6 below.

⁹⁸ The rationale for this judgement is set out at pp. 146–8 below.

⁹⁹ *A Relic of Slavery: Farquharson's Journal for 1831–32* (Nassau: Dean Peggs Research Fund, 1957); Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince*, ed. Sara Salih (1831; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000 edn.).

people who built the Bahamian cotton economy came, and the wider literature approaching plantation slavery from the standpoint of labour history.¹⁰⁰

Notwithstanding its limitations, all of this amounts to a rather substantial body of evidence, a large portion of it manuscripts; the relevant CO23 files alone amount to somewhere in the region of 4,000 double-sided folios, organised by year, but mostly not calendared or indexed. The volume of Loyalist-related material alone can seem daunting; simply keeping track of who individual Loyalists were, and what they did and said, both in the Bahamas and North America, is an important but involving process. In this respect, I am enormously indebted to the compilers of various biographical and genealogical resources on Loyalists generally and in East Florida, and to those historians of Bahamian Loyalists who adopted a prosopographical approach.¹⁰¹

Arranging and organising this material satisfactorily poses considerable challenges. The elaborate web of intersections between different actors and factors that I seek to illustrate would be all-but impossible to convey via a wholly linear narrative. Conversely, a primarily thematic structure would struggle to convey the dynamic nature of this complex pattern of interactions, and moreover, in dealing with the detail of specific events, is continually at risk of violating the principle that ‘something that causes something else generally comes before it in time, not after’.¹⁰²

Instead, I have tried to combine, or at least juxtapose elements of each. The overall arrangement of what follows is broadly though not rigidly chronological. Each chapter addresses distinct issues, but in exploring them, I have varyingly emphasised narrative and thematic approaches as seemed most effective and appropriate.

¹⁰⁰ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*; Philip D. Morgan, ‘Work and Culture: The task system and the world of lowcountry blacks, 1700 to 1880’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 39:4 (October 1982), 563–99; Joyce E. Chaplin, *An Anxious Pursuit: Agricultural innovation and modernity in the lower South, 1730–1815* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Ira Berlin & Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the shaping of black life in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993); Stephen Innes, ed., *Work and Labor in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Turner, ed., *Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves*.

¹⁰¹ Sabine, *Biographical Sketches*; Daniel Parker Coke, *The Royal Commission on the Losses and Services of American Loyalists 1783 to 1785*, ed. Hugh Edward Egerton (1915; repr. New York: Burt Franklin, 1971); Wilbur H. Siebert, ed., *Loyalists in East Florida 1774–1785: the most important documents pertaining thereto edited with an accompanying narrative*, 2 vols. (Deland: Florida State Historical Society, 1929); Lawrence H. Feldman, ed., *The Last Days of British Saint Augustine, 1784–1785: A Spanish census of the English colony in East Florida* (Baltimore: Clearfield, 1998); Parrish, ‘Records’; Riley, *Homeward Bound*.

¹⁰² Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997), 140.

Chapter one begins by looking at efforts to reconcile the centrality of freedom in eighteenth-century ideas about Britishness with the imperial realities of African slavery and territorial expansion overseas from the 1760s. It argues that the North American imperial crisis facilitated, and was in turn complicated by, the emergence of a hitherto largely latent hostility towards slavery and slaveholding within sections of mainstream metropolitan opinion. As crisis turned to civil war and revolution in the mid-1770s, this hostility fed into a complex dynamic of slave resistance, slaveholders' anxieties, rumour and political tension that would see imperial officials and soldiers, especially Dunmore, make offers of freedom to which African Americans in the South enthusiastically responded. The second chapter examines how their involvement in the post-war Loyalist diaspora affected the uncertain status of these African Americans, especially in the context of the initial relocation of Loyalists from the lower South to East Florida. When the latter colony was ceded to Spain in 1783, those émigrés were uprooted once again. After surveying the state of the Bahamas at this point, I address the considerable distance between Loyalist rhetoric and the reality of how and why so many people came to settle in the islands in the 1780s. The ways in which these migrations catalysed efforts to transform the Bahamas are discussed in chapter three. I argue that the revolutionary legacy of disruption to the black émigrés' enslaved status had enormous political and economic implications for Loyalist slaveholders' attempts to establish a Bahamian plantocracy, as well as facilitating the ability of non-white people to shape and control their own lives. By the later 1780s, mounting resistance and social tension prompted Lord Dunmore, governor from the end of 1787, to embark on the remarkable course of action explored in chapter four. From 1788–93, Dunmore sought to fulfil the British government's Revolutionary War promises of freedom to African Americans in the Bahamas, precipitating an embittered political struggle with Loyalist slaveholders. After presenting new evidence for the extent of these liberatory initiatives, I reassess Dunmore's attitude to slavery and black people in Virginia and the Bahamas in terms of the conservative antislavery impulses discussed in chapter one. The fifth chapter traces how, during the 1790s, the continuing political, economic and social effects of all these developments were affected by the unfolding revolution in Saint-Domingue and the resumption of imperial conflict in the Atlantic, culminating in 1797 with an insurrectionary plot by French and Bahamian slaves whose brutal suppression marked the unification of Bahamian whites under a slaveholding elite. After delineating both the results, and the

very real limits of this elite's hegemony in the nineteenth century, the conclusion considers what fresh insights the Bahamian experience seems to offer on the revolutionary crisis of Atlantic slavery.

Chapter One

The Problem of Revolution in the Age of Slavery

In 1770, the British Atlantic empire formed a trans-oceanic capitalist nexus of trade, commerce and production that incorporated Europe, America and Africa within a notionally unitary mercantilist framework. In the process, it ‘ground out the lives of millions of captives in an implacable commercial frenzy’. The labour of nearly 900,000 Africans in the West Indies and North America generated huge profits from the seemingly limitless European markets for staple commodities such as sugar, tobacco, and rice.¹ Yet, throughout the eighteenth century, freedom was a central theme in British political thought and culture, and was widely regarded as a key marker of national identity. This chapter begins by examining why Britons long remained untroubled by this apparent contradiction, and how, from the 1760s, increasingly authoritarian attitudes to an enlarged empire could give rise to both more inclusive conceptions of imperial rule, and to an identification of slaveholding as distinctively un-British. It then traces how these tendencies turned African enslavement into a highly-charged issue in Britain’s deteriorating relationship with its mainland American colonies in the 1770s. The second section relates how this development would be explosively played out in the course of the American Revolutionary War, as enslaved African Americans explored novel opportunities to seek their freedom as part of the British effort to subdue the colonial rebellion. This counter-revolutionary enterprise of course proved unsuccessful, but in the subsequent exodus of its protagonists to the Bahamas and other parts of the British empire in the 1780s, the emancipatory possibilities it had opened up remained very much alive.

¹ Blackburn, *Overthrow*, 41, 5, table 1.

I: An Empire for Liberty?

Arguing the case for conciliatory measures towards the recalcitrant North American colonists in March 1775, Edmund Burke told the House of Commons that the ‘fierce spirit of Liberty is stronger in the English Colonies probably than in any other people of the earth’. In the same year, Burke’s view was echoed in less elevated tones by a British visitor to America, who declared that ‘they are all liberty mad’.²

This strident, nigh-on obsessive concern with freedom was one of the signs of American distinctiveness and difference that seemed increasingly apparent to metropolitan Britons in the years after the Seven Years War.³ Conversely, for the colonists themselves, it was an expression of their British heritage, and certainly, the English were as likely as Americans to think of ‘this country as the sanctuary of liberty, the sacred temple consecrated to our common faith’.⁴

For contemporaries, there was no inherent contradiction between freedom and empire; rather, ‘liberty was... the single most important element in defining a larger Imperial identity for Britain and the British Empire.’ Unlike the despotic empires of other European powers, ‘stained with acts of oppressive violence, of cruelty, injustice and peculation’, Britain’s was uniquely ‘a free and virtuous empire, founded in consent and nurtured in liberty and trade’. Freedom was widely considered the foundation of the British empire, and the ultimate cause of its remarkable success. For Burke, it was ‘the true act of navigation,’ the ‘sole bond, which originally made, and must still preserve, the unity of the empire.’⁵

² Edmund Burke, *The Speech of Edmund Burke, Esq; on moving his resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies, March 22, 1775* (London, 1775), 16; *The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell 1774–1777* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1925), 57.

³ T. H. Breen, ‘Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution: Revisions *once more* in need of revising’, *Journal of American History*, 84:1 (June 1997), 28–31; Stephen Conway, ‘From Fellow-Nationals to Foreigners: British perceptions of the Americans, circa 1739–1783’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 59:1 (January 2002), 65–100; Jack P. Greene, ‘Empire and Identity from the Glorious Revolution to the American Revolution’, in P. J. Marshall, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire, II: The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), 209–213; Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1998), 3–7.

⁴ Burke, *Conciliation*, 60.

⁵ Greene, ‘Empire and Identity’, 208, 222–3 (speech of George Dempster to the House of Commons, 27 October 1775, quoted at 223); Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, culture and imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 277; Burke, *Conciliation*, 61. See also David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 125–8, 142–5, 173–98.

The freedom extolled by Burke and other Britons was couched in explicitly national and exclusive terms. ‘Liberty according to English ideas, and on English principles’ was the birthright of the ‘free-born Englishman’, something that made ‘the chosen race’ different from, and better than other peoples.⁶ It was also very much defined in relation and opposition to ‘slavery’, considered by John Locke as early as the seventeenth century to be ‘so vile and miserable an Estate of Man’, as to be ‘directly opposite to the generous Temper and Courage of our Nation.’⁷ Slavery was the ‘absolute political evil’ in eighteenth-century British political discourse, but it was also ubiquitous, ‘a weed that grows in every soil.’ As Burke put it, ‘slavery’ was something the colonists ‘can have any where... They may have it from Spain, they may have it from France, they may have it from Prussia.’ As such, slavery was well placed to serve as a defining antithesis of Britishness: it was only the shortest of jumps from a strident insistence that ‘*Britons* never will be slaves’ to the assumption that *slaves* could not be Britons.⁸

There was, of course, a considerable incongruity between a rhetorical devotion to freedom and abhorrence of slavery, and the imperial reality of the enslavement and brutal exploitation of hundreds of thousands of Africans. Samuel Johnson’s famous jibe at the hypocrisy of ‘yelps for liberty’ from ‘the drivers of negroes’, directed at the American rebels, was equally applicable to the British ‘Empire of liberty’.⁹ But for the most part, eighteenth-century Britons lived with this

⁶ Burke, *Conciliation*, 16, 60; see also E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (rev. edn., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 84–92; Foner, *Freedom*, 5–7. Contemporaries, including the Irish-born Burke and many North Americans, were often neither precise or consistent in their use of the terms ‘English’ and ‘British’. On the complex, ambiguous, and often bitterly contested relationship between eighteenth-century discourses of ‘Englishness’ and ‘Britishness’ see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the nation 1707–1837* (2nd edn., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 11–18, 101–45; Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, empire and gender in the eighteenth century* (London: Routledge, 2003), 1–18, 49–53; Breen, ‘Ideology and Nationalism’, 23.

⁷ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (1689/90; student edn., Cambridge: CUP, 1988), 141.

⁸ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992 edn.), 232; Burke, *Conciliation*, 61; James Thomson & David Mallet, ‘Alfred. A Masque’ [1740], in Chris Brooks & Peter Faulkner, eds., *The White Man’s Burdens: An anthology of British poetry of the empire* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), 79–80 (emphasis in original); on the concept of slavery in early modern English social and political discourse see also Jordan, *White over Black*, 52–6; Davis, *Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 118–21.

⁹ Samuel Johnson, *Taxation no Tyranny; an Answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress* (London, 1775), 89; Thomas Jefferson to George Rogers Clark, 25 December 1780, Boyd et al., eds., *Jefferson Papers*, 4:237; Jefferson also used the expression ‘an empire for liberty’ in Jefferson to James Madison, 27 April 1809, J. Jefferson Looney, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement series*, 4 vols. to date (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004–), 1:169.

gulf between practice and avowed principles, just as Thomas Jefferson could simultaneously possess both a ‘heartfelt hatred of slavery’, and hundreds of unfree African Americans.¹⁰

The contradiction was readily disregarded. The British usually invoked ‘slavery’ as ‘a term referring to a specific political condition... characteristic of the lives of contemporary [Europeans]’, especially the Catholic subjects of the absolutist Bourbon monarchies. The parallel with the mass enslavement of Africans in the British empire was rarely acknowledged before the American Revolution, when ‘most in Britain had tended to think of colonial slavery and the Atlantic slave trade as unfortunate and distasteful but beyond the power of anyone to address effectively.’¹¹

Somewhat ironically, the prevalence of this attitude was facilitated and reinforced by the application of liberty ‘on English principles’ to the empire. One such principle was the sanctity of private property, considered to be not only a foundation of British commercial success, but also the basis of the ‘independence’ necessary for membership of the ‘political nation.’ In turn, the latter’s right of ‘self-government’ by elected representatives was enshrined in the invented tradition of the ‘ancient’ constitution, regarded across all shades of political opinion as the fundamental basis and guarantee of English liberty.¹²

Hence, the settler colonists of North America and the West Indies considered themselves equal partners in an imperial project based on their freely-given consent. They exercised far more autonomy than the colonies of the other European empires, and considered their legislative assemblies to possess a sovereignty equal to and distinct from that of the Westminster parliament, whose jurisdiction overseas was notionally confined to the regulation of foreign and inter-colonial trade.¹³

In consequence, whereas slaveholding in the Spanish and French empires was at least theoretically subject to metropolitan supervision and regulation, eighteenth-century British slavery was governed by local laws promulgated by the colonial

¹⁰ Jordan, *White over Black*, 431; Davis, *Age of Revolution*, 166–84.

¹¹ Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 234; Brown, *Moral Capital*, 153.

¹² Foner, *Freedom*, 9–10; Greene, ‘Empire and Identity’, 209–11; Thompson, *Making*, 85–97.

¹³ Greene, ‘Empire and Identity’, 222–3; Ian K. Steele, ‘The Anointed, the Appointed, and the Elected: Governance of the British empire, 1689–1784’, in Marshall, ed., *British Empire*, 2:111–114; Colley, *Britons*, 135–6; P. J. Marshall, ‘The Eighteenth-Century Empire’, in Jeremy Black, ed., *British Politics and Society from Walpole to Pitt 1742–1789* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 197; P. J. Marshall, ‘Britain and the World in the Eighteenth-Century: I, Reshaping the Empire’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th ser., 8 (1998), 6–7, 10.

assemblies and often formulated directly by the planters themselves. Such slave codes, usually concerned almost exclusively with controlling the enslaved, typically afforded slaveholders a near-absolute freedom from legal constraints.¹⁴

Even if many of the people in Britain responsible for imperial administration did not entirely concur with colonial assertions of constitutional autonomy, as far as slavery was concerned, such ideas went unchallenged in practice for most of the eighteenth century. Over time, London's policy of 'salutary neglect' (which of course did not preclude actively suppressing colonial attempts to restrict the transatlantic slave trade) coalesced into 'customary rights that insulated slavery from external attack.'¹⁵

Those rights also helped metropolitan Britons not to notice the extent of their own complicity in the Atlantic slave system. For most people in Britain, the nation's pivotal role in slavery was something experienced indirectly, via the consumption of commodities like sugar and tobacco, and the profits that flowed into port cities like London, Liverpool and Glasgow. Euphemisms such as the 'African' and 'West Indian' trade, and the impersonal mechanisms of capitalist financial investment, served to obfuscate the vicious realities of 'a circuitous commerce', enabling the British to assume that slavery had little to do with themselves.¹⁶ Rather, responsibility for this 'very great and shocking evil' lay overseas, with morally degenerate American and West Indian slaveholders, 'the refuse of the jails of Europe', whose 'levity, brutality, and baseness' could not but 'justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished.'¹⁷

¹⁴ Elsa V. Goveia, 'The West Indian Slave Laws of the 18th Century', in Douglas Hall et al., eds., *Chapters in Caribbean History*, 2 (Kingston: Caribbean Universities Press, 1970), 10–20, 29–49; Eliga H. Gould, 'Zones of Law, Zones of Violence: The legal geography of the British Atlantic, circa 1772', *WMQ* 3rd ser., 60:3 (July 2003), 497–501, 504–7.

¹⁵ Marshall, 'Eighteenth-Century Empire', 130; Burke, *Conciliation*, 14; Brown, *Moral Capital*, 244–5; on the vetoing of American attempts to limit slave imports by prohibition or taxation before the Revolution by colonial governors and the Privy Council see Brown, *Moral Capital*, 135–6.

¹⁶ Burke, *Conciliation*, 9; George Chalmers to Bahamas Committee of Correspondence, 8 April 1797, Add. MSS 22900, f. 84.

¹⁷ [Maurice Morgann], *A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies* (London, 1772), i; Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael & A. L. Macfie (1759; Oxford: OUP, 1976 edn.), 206–7. See also Jack P. Greene, 'Liberty, Slavery and the Transformation of British Identity in the Eighteenth-Century West Indies', *Slavery and Abolition*, 21:1 (April 2000), 10–16; Greene, 'Empire and Identity', 225–7; Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British mobilization in comparative perspective* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 16–23.

Lord Chief Justice Mansfield's 1772 ruling on the case of James Somerset, apparently confirming chattel slavery's incompatibility with English law, was greeted with widespread public acclaim. Not without justification, historians have often cited the case as the first tangible achievement of British antislavery, both a harbinger of and a catalyst for the rise of mass-abolitionism in the 1780s.¹⁸ But Granville Sharp's undoubted sympathy with the plight of slaves was coupled with widely shared anxieties about 'the dangerous increase of slaves in this Kingdom.' Fears of racial contamination overlapped with Sharp's dread that England might become 'as base, wicked and Tyrannical as our colonies.' Thus, at least for those eager to be convinced, Mansfield's hedged and ambiguous judgement reaffirmed the façade of a clear, tidy dividing line between British liberty and colonial slavery.¹⁹ While the Somerset decision drew British attention to the evils of slavery, it did so in a largely self-congratulatory way, that avoided questioning conventional assumptions about the virtue of empire in general. Blame for slavery could be safely ascribed to the moral failings of *other* people, people whose Britishness was open to question, such as slaveholders, Americans and West Indians.

At the end of the Seven Years War in 1763, Britain had emerged as perhaps the world's first truly global power. Britons on both sides of the Atlantic could view their stunning victories across the world as a resounding vindication of 'Liberty on English principles'. But the process of grappling with the novel problems posed by this 'dangerous triumph' would undermine the complacent equation of empire with freedom.²⁰

The vast territorial gains made by 1763 rendered the traditional fiction of a relatively homogenous empire peopled mainly by ethnic Britons increasingly untenable. What had been considered a distinctively British empire based on trade, settlement and sea power was now augmented by an empire of territorial conquest more reminiscent of ancient Rome and the contemporary Spanish and Portuguese

¹⁸ See for instance Davis, *Age of Revolution*, 470–501; Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings. Britain, the slaves and the American Revolution* (London: BBC, 2005), 44–63; Brown, *Moral Capital*, 91–101, 117–8; Drescher, *Abolition*, 99–105.

¹⁹ Sharp to archbishop of Canterbury, 15 May 1769, Sharp to Bryant, 19 October 1772, both quoted in Brown *Moral Capital*, 94, 96; Gould, 'Zones of Law, Zones of Violence', 474–5, 507–8.

²⁰ Bruce P. Lennan, 'Colonial Wars and Imperial Instability, 1688–1793', in Marshall, ed., *British Empire*, 2:159.

dominions.²¹ A diverse array of hitherto alien peoples, including tens of thousands of Native Americans and French Canadians, and millions of Asians, now fell within the ambit of British power. How that power was to be exercised, and the broader question of what role would be played in the empire by people whose language, culture, religion, socio-economic organisation and legal and political traditions seemed radically different from British norms, would command the attention of those concerned with imperial governance over the following decades.²²

For the most part, the answers they formulated had a distinctly authoritarian cast. To imperial administrators and officials it was largely self-evident that the new colonists were not British, and certainly could not be treated as willing or equal participants in the empire. As such, they were neither entitled to nor suitable for ‘that equal communion of privileges founded on legislative institutions, which constitutes freedom upon English principles’. Something rather like nineteenth-century Crown Colony government was instituted in the short-lived African colony of Senegambia, founded in 1765. Guy Carleton, governor of Quebec, observed in 1768 that ‘the British form of government, transplanted into this continent, will never produce the same fruits as at home... in the American forests.’ Administration by a royal governor and an appointed Council was accordingly established by the 1774 Quebec Act. Whereas the latter provoked heated controversy in Britain and America, it was generally accepted that in Asia, ‘the British must operate a despotism’, since ‘virtually no one believed that... Protestant truth, free government or the common law had any application to India for the foreseeable future.’²³

If such peoples were not ‘freeborn Englishmen’, there could be little doubt that they had become ‘Subjects of the Crown of Great Britain’, a status that ‘retained [or perhaps re-invented] the quasi-medieval connotations of a personal bond between individual and lord.’ In 1765, James Otis could write of the existence ‘of five millions of his majesty’s American subjects, white, brown, and black.’ This ‘civic analogue of

²¹ Lennan, ‘Colonial Wars’, 159–163; H. V. Bowen, ‘British Conceptions of Global Empire, 1756–83’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 26:3 (September 1998), 7, 4–8; P. J. Marshall, ‘Empire and Authority in the Later Eighteenth Century’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 15:2 (May 1987), 106–7; Colley, *Britons*, 101–5.

²² Marshall, ‘Britain and the World’, 9–10; Brown, *Moral Capital*, 220–21.

²³ ‘An oration delivered at Cambridge by the Honourable Thomas Erskine, on his taking the degree of Bachelor of Arts’, *Bahama Gazette*, 14 March 1789; Steele, ‘Governance’, 122; Brown, *Moral Capital*, 274–7; Marshall, ‘Empire and Authority’, 112–3, 118 (Carleton quoted at 112); Peter Marshall, ‘British North America, 1760–1815’, in Marshall, ed., *British Empire*, 2:378.

the relation between parent and child' informed a paternalism that in some respects anticipated the nineteenth-century discourse of an imperial mission to civilise and improve primitive peoples. Burke insisted that 'all political power which is set over men... ought to be some way or other exercised ultimately for their benefit.' If empire could not immediately extend the sphere of freedom, then it should be validated by 'promoting, the wealth, the number, the happiness, of the human race.' The Bishop of Oxford spoke of the Church of England's duty of 'conciliating, civilising, and instructing the barbarous nations of North America.'²⁴

Such paternalism informed various measures taken during the 1760s and 1770s that aimed at conciliating the new subject peoples. The Quebec Act recognised French civil law and guaranteed religious toleration for Catholics. Francophone Catholics in Grenada were admitted to legislative and judicial office and exempted from the Test Acts. Parliamentary investigation and regulation of the East India Company began to develop from the 1770s. The Royal Proclamation of 1763, and the subsequent attempts to supervise the North American frontier directly from London, represented an attempt, albeit a largely unsuccessful one, to restrict the encroachment of settlers and speculators upon Native American lands in the trans-Appalachian West.²⁵ Of course, such steps were also very much in line with British strategic interests. Efforts to incorporate and protect the interests of the empire's non-British subjects were intended to reduce the threats of rebellion and conflict with the older colonies.

Subjectship implied a relationship of mutual duties and responsibilities, and providing opportunities for the conquered to contribute to the imperial project was a well-established method of utilising such people's particular talents while simultaneously cementing their allegiance. In the 1760s, a strikingly successful example of this practice was afforded by the Scottish Highlanders. Regarded after the 1745 Jacobite rising as an alien, barbaric, and dangerously disloyal people,

²⁴ John Campbell, *A Political Survey of Britain...*, 2 vols. (London, 1774), 2:684, n.; James Otis, *Considerations on behalf of the colonists. In a letter to a noble Lord* (London, 1765), 30; Brown, *Moral Capital*, 221–2; Edmund Burke, *Mr. Burke's Speech, on the 1st December 1783, upon... Mr. Fox's East India Bill* (London, 1784), 7–8; Burke, *Conciliation*, 62; Robert Lowth, *A Sermon Preached before the Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel...* (London, 1771), 24; Marshall, 'Empire and Authority', 114–8; on the idea of 'trusteeship' in the nineteenth-century empire see Andrew Porter, 'Trusteeship, Anti-Slavery, and Humanitarianism' in Andrew Porter, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire III: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 198–221.

²⁵ Marshall, 'British North America', 378; O'Shaughnessy, *Empire Divided*, 124–5; H. V. Bowen, 'British India, 1765–1813: the metropolitan context', in Marshall, ed., *British Empire*, 2:532–41; Daniel K. Richter, 'Native Peoples of North America and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire', in Marshall, ed., *British Empire*, 2:364–6; Brown, *Moral Capital*, 222–6.

Highlanders' distinctive culture and social organisation had been brutally suppressed. But by the Seven Years War, their martial zeal and clan traditions were being enlisted in the service of empire. William Pitt the Elder boasted to parliament in 1766 of how he 'drew into your service' this 'hardy and intrepid race of men', who had 'served with fidelity as they fought with valour and conquered for you in every part of the world.' James Wolfe observed more cynically that the Highlanders were 'hardy, intrepid, accustom'd to a rough Country, and no great mischief if they fall. How can you *better employ a secret enemy* than by making his end conducive to the common good?',²⁶

This kind of approach to the problem of integrating conquered peoples could also help facilitate new thinking about the status of 'strangers' already present in Britain's older 'marchlands'.²⁷ In 1772, the first concrete proposal for the gradual emancipation of slaves in the British empire was published anonymously by Maurice Morgann, who during the previous decade had been successively employed as private secretary to the president of the Board of Trade, undersecretary responsible for America in the Southern Department, and cabinet emissary to Quebec. Morgann's *Plan for the Abolition of Slavery* had first been formulated as a policy memorandum soon after the peace of 1763. It received little or no ministerial attention, and was 'thrown aside, and almost forgotten', until its anonymous publication in 1772.²⁸

The scheme, calling for the British government to purchase annually a number of African children who would be educated in Britain, before being settled as free adults in the newly acquired and sparsely-populated territory of West Florida, was at once hugely ambitious and remarkably naïve. Morgann was certain that 'both experience and the nature of man... forbid us to suppose that there is any original or essential difference in the mental part, however our bodies may be varied by colour.' He anticipated not only the eradication of slavery, but complete social and cultural assimilation, and even phenotypical homogenisation through intermarriage. This went far beyond the scope of mainstream nineteenth-century abolitionism. But Morgann's

²⁶ Pitt and Wolfe quoted in John Prebble, *Mutiny: Highland Regiments in Revolt, 1743–1804* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977 edn.), 93–4 (my emphasis). See also Robert Clyde, *From Rebel to Hero: the image of the Highlander 1745–1830* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1995); Colley, *Britons*, 117–20; Eric Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses of the Atlantic Empire', in Bailyn & Morgan, eds., *Strangers within the Realm*, 67–114.

²⁷ Bailyn & Morgan, introduction in *Strangers within the Realm*, 1, 10–31.

²⁸ [Morgann], *Plan*, i; for an extensive discussion of this text, with a convincing argument for Morgann's authorship, see Brown, *Moral Capital*, 213–220.

vision of ‘an united people of various habit and complexion’ was to be realised purely through the force of example. The commercial success of the West Florida colony would demonstrate to all that slavery was economically inefficient as well as unjust, without the need for further state intervention or coercion.²⁹

If establishing the empire upon ‘the sure foundation of equality and justice’ constituted a worthwhile end in itself, Morgann also had less altruistic objectives in mind. In the first instance, eliminating slavery would remove the perpetual threat to colonial security posed by a disaffected servile population. In language strikingly reminiscent of Raynal, Morgann warned that if nothing was done to redress slaves’ manifest grievances, they would one day ‘throw off at once the yoke of tyranny to revenge their wrongs in the blood of their oppressors.’³⁰

But as ‘the black subjects of Britain’, Africans might instead play a unique and valuable role in the development of the imperial project. At present, the empire was ‘restrained by climate’ insofar as Europeans were supposedly physically unsuited to life in the tropics. Establishing ‘colonies of free Negroes... perfectly attached and dependent, such as... might act in the hot climates with unabated vigour’ would remove this obstacle. Thus armed with both moral and material superiority, Britain could ‘stretch forth, with irresistible power, her sable arm through every region of the Torrid Zone’, ‘shake the power of Spain to its foundations’, and ascend to ‘the seat of unenvied and unlimited Dominion.’³¹

The Somerset case inspired Morgann to offer up his proposal for public scrutiny, and his thinking very much paralleled Sharp’s efforts to reconcile antislavery with a patriotic and conservative political outlook.³² In 1772, Morgann acknowledged that ‘too warm a zeal’ might have ‘transported him too far into speculation’ in his musings upon how antislavery projects might be married to schemes of imperial aggrandisement.³³ But within a few years, British policymakers and soldiers faced with revolutionary crisis in America would be contemplating how the king’s black subjects might be enlisted to fight simultaneously for their own freedom and for the preservation of the empire.

²⁹ [Morgann], *Plan*, i, 5, 32–33.

³⁰ [Morgann], *Plan*, 14.

³¹ [Morgann], *Plan*, 26–8.

³² Brown, *Moral Capital*, 155–206; Davis, *Age of Revolution*, 375.

³³ [Morgann], *Plan*, i, 33.

Morgann's insistence that 'a colony, as far as respects the ends of its formation, should be considered as wholly subservient to the mother country' was very much in line with an attitude becoming increasingly prevalent in official circles. The idea of a single, unitary British empire had begun to take shape in the second quarter of the eighteenth-century. After 1763, it gained increasingly common currency as London's administrators and politicians assumed a more active role in the governance of that empire, and became less tolerant of colonial opposition and autonomy.³⁴

This centralising tendency had manifold roots. The view of the colonies as 'outposts of British economic or strategic power' had always had its adherents, and some in Whitehall had been convinced of the need to curb the autonomy of the old settler colonies since at least the 1740s. George III's initial determination to personally manage the government as 'King-in-Parliament' can be seen as signalling a new intent to strengthen central authority. The instability and rapid turnover of his early ministries arguably meant that increasing initiative was devolved upon senior departmental officials who already favoured a shift of power back towards London.³⁵

For some contemporaries, the new reality of an empire of direct rule over non-Europeans generated fears that British overseas conquests had 'brought with them not only Asiatic luxury, but I fear Asiatic principles of government'.³⁶ Some scholars have argued that the experience of governing extensive non-English speaking populations after 1763 gradually became incorporated within the informal corpus of common presumptions and perspectives that comprised imperial policy, and so encouraged 'more authoritarian experiments' elsewhere.³⁷ Certainly, as far as many North Americans were concerned, the Quebec Act had established 'in a neighbouring province... a despotism dangerous to our very existence'.³⁸

³⁴ [Morgann], *Plan*, 4; P. J. Marshall, introduction in *British Empire*, 2:7–8; Bowen, 'British Conceptions of Global Empire', 4–11; Marshall, 'Empire and Authority', 106–7; Steele, 'Governance', 121–5; Armitage, *Ideological Origins*, 170–72.

³⁵ Greene, 'Empire and Identity', 223–5; Marshall, 'Eighteenth-Century Empire', 130; Steele, 'Governance', 121.

³⁶ Earl of Chatham, January 1770, quoted in Bowen, 'British India', 542.

³⁷ Steele, 'Governance', 121; see also Colley, *Britons*, 102–3.

³⁸ 'Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms', 6 July 1775, Boyd et al., eds., *Jefferson Papers*, 1:215.

Widespread resistance in the mainland American colonies to measures clarifying or augmenting metropolitan authority only served, for the most part, to bolster British determination to assert the unqualified sovereignty of the Westminster parliament over the colonial legislatures. The resulting dynamic of mutual intransigence fuelled the escalation of an imperial crisis that would culminate in civil war and revolution.³⁹

With a few notable exceptions, it may well be true that ‘no one had set out to question the institution of chattel slavery’ in the course of the disputes that gave rise to the American Revolution.⁴⁰ But from an early stage, slavery was an implicit and uncomfortable factor in the unfolding trajectory of the American crisis.

As we have seen, slaveholding was one of several characteristics that metropolitan Britons increasingly came to emphasise in defining the colonists as distinctively ‘American’, a people who were less than fully British, but undoubtedly just as much subordinate to the sovereignty of King-in-Parliament as any of the empire’s other subject peoples.⁴¹ From the 1760s onwards, Americans resident in London, such as Benjamin Franklin, were worrying that the prevalence of this image of the colonists in Britain would ‘encourage those who would oppress us, by representing us as unworthy of the Liberty we are now contending for.’ Such concerns were amplified by the Somerset case, as the nation ‘piqu’d itself on its Virtue[,] Love of Liberty, and the Equity in its Courts in setting free a single Negro.’ By 1775, hardliners on the American question such as William Innes could defiantly assert in the House of Commons that it was ‘absurd to say, that a people who import slaves, and are despotic over them... have a right to the freedom which the Inhabitants of this country enjoy. The North American spirit and practice in this respect have surely nothing in them similar to what prevails in Great Britain.’⁴²

³⁹ On the imperial crisis of the 1760s and 1770s see Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*; Pauline S. Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial radicals and the development of American opposition to Britain, 1765–1776* (New York: Vintage, 1972); Stephen Conway, ‘Britain and the Revolutionary Crisis, 1763–1791’, in Marshall, ed., *British Empire*, 2:325–46.

⁴⁰ Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 232.

⁴¹ Conway, ‘Fellow-Nationals to Foreigners’, 65–100; Breen, ‘Ideology and Nationalism’, 22–23, 27–32.

⁴² Benjamin Franklin to Anthony Benezet, 22 August 1772, quoted in Brown, *Moral Capital*, 118; Speech by William Innes, 8 November 1775, in William Cobbett & T. C. Hansard, eds., *The Parliamentary History of England, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, 36 vols. (London, 1806–20), 18:877.

Conversely, when Americans denounced a metropolitan design to ‘enslave them’, they drew upon ‘a specific meaning’ of ‘slavery as a political concept’ derived from the English ‘Country’ tradition.⁴³ But it is hard to believe that the literalness and sheer enthusiasm with which colonists invoked the term did not owe something to the presence of African Americans who offered an unavoidable reminder of what enslavement might mean.⁴⁴

John Adams certainly suggested as much when, denouncing the Stamp Act in 1765, he insisted that ‘We won’t be their Negroes.’ Even a self-proclaimed friend of America like Burke could believe that the Southern colonies were ‘by far the most proud and jealous of their freedom’ on account of their possessing ‘vast multitudes of slaves’, since ‘in such a people the haughtiness of domination combines with the spirit of freedom, fortifies it, and renders it invincible.’⁴⁵

In its July 1775 ‘Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms’, written by Thomas Jefferson, the second Continental Congress described Britain’s ‘cruel and impolitic Purpose of enslaving these Colonies’ as a design for ‘a Part of the human Race to hold an absolute Property in, and an unbounded Power over others... as the Objects of a legal Domination never rightfully resistible, however severe and oppressive.’⁴⁶ The implications of such language were not easy to miss, especially when combined with ideas about natural and universal rights to liberty. At least one of Virginia’s planter elite, Landon Carter, supposedly presumed that the adoption of the Declaration of Independence would entail setting his slaves free.⁴⁷

Awareness of these contradictions prompted ‘a haphazard, uneven, loosely connected, though mutually reinforcing efflorescence of antislavery impulses and gestures’ that would eventually contribute to the gradual extinction of slavery in the

⁴³ Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 233–4.

⁴⁴ This point is forcefully argued (perhaps further than the evidence can support) in F. Nwabueze Okoye, ‘Chattel Slavery as the Nightmare of the American Revolutionaries’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 37:1 (January 1980), 4–28.

⁴⁵ Adams, writing as ‘Humphrey Ploughjogger’, *Boston Gazette*, 14 October 1765, quoted in Breen, ‘Ideology and Nationalism’, 29; Burke, *Conciliation*, 18–19; a comparable argument regarding the pivotal role of chattel slavery in the development in Virginia of a distinctive ideology stressing the freedom and equality of white Americans is expounded in Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*; see also the remarks in Furstenberg, ‘Beyond Freedom and Slavery’, 1295–1330.

⁴⁶ ‘Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms’, 6 July 1775, Boyd et al., eds., *Jefferson Papers*, 1:213.

⁴⁷ Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: OUP, 2009), 63.

Northern states.⁴⁸ In the context of the imperial crisis of the 1770s, however, the ‘tension between values and practices’ was more readily addressed in a manner that could also serve broader American principles and interests. Slave imports were suspended by a resolution of the Continental Congress in 1774 as part of the colonial boycott of trade with Britain, and henceforth the Atlantic slave trade was singled out for attack by American commentators and politicians. Highlighting London’s role in ‘suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain’ the ‘execrable commerce’ of the Atlantic slave trade lent a tone of moral superiority to more obviously self-interested assertions of the colonies’ right to regulate and control their own trade.⁴⁹

Supporters of the British government were quick to respond in kind. The hypocrisy of American slaveholders was derided and condemned by figures such as Samuel Johnson, John Wesley, Ambrose Serle, John Lind, John Shebbeare and Josiah Tucker. Precisely because both sides were so complicit in the practice of colonial slavery, the issue of culpability offered virtually limitless scope for partisan rhetorical warfare, generating a rapidly escalating dynamic of tit-for-tat accusations and denunciations. In the process, during the mid-1770s, chattel slavery became established within mainstream anglophone political discourse ‘as an archetype of injustice.’⁵⁰

Hence, in December 1775, the idealistic MP for Hull, David Hartley, a supporter of the American cause, could introduce a bill granting all North American slaves the right to trial by jury, intended not only ‘as an auspicious beginning to lay the first stone of universal liberty to mankind,’ but also as a means whereby the colonies might ‘re-establish peace and harmony with the parent state.’ As Christopher Brown observes, ‘few moments better illustrate how inadequately the self-professed “friends of America” understood the nature of the developing revolution in North America or the place of slavery in colonial society.’ But in naively assuming that ‘no American could hesitate an instant to comply with’ his proposal, Hartley did no more

⁴⁸ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 107; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 228–55.

⁴⁹ Davis, *Age of Revolution*, 119–20; ‘Jefferson’s “original Rough draught” of the Declaration of Independence’, June/ July 1776, Boyd et al., eds., *Jefferson Papers*, 1:426; for a discussion of the antislavery passages removed from the final version of the Declaration see Sidney Kaplan, ‘The “Domestic Insurrections” of the Declaration of Independence’, *JNH*, 61:3 (July 1976), 243–55.

⁵⁰ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 114, 119–29.

than take the antislavery sentiments in the rhetoric coming from both sides at face value.⁵¹

For all that men such as Wesley, Johnson and Tucker sincerely despised slavery in itself, these writers were principally concerned with demonstrating the moral bankruptcy of American claims to ‘that *equality*’ and ‘those *unalienable rights*, with which... God is declared to have *endowed all* mankind.’⁵² Thus, in the context of the revolutionary crisis, attacking slavery could contribute to the larger end of defending and preserving the integrity of the empire; antislavery became directly and practically identified with imperial patriotism.

The ways in which opposition to slavery could be informed and facilitated by an aggressively conservative attitude to imperial governance are readily apparent in the thinking of Reverend James Ramsay of Saint Christopher, who emerged as a leading figure in the first phase of British abolitionism during the 1780s, after spending much of the 1770s formulating ‘a plan for the education and gradual emancipation of slaves in the West Indies’ that was submitted to leading English bishops in 1778.⁵³ Ramsay was convinced that ‘the chain of slavery has been fashioned and applied by the hand of liberty’; the colonists had claimed an unrestricted freedom for themselves, and had abused this great privilege to deprive others of their liberty. The colonial slave codes amounted to the ‘negation of law’ by effectively removing all limits to the power of slaveholders. To Ramsay, ‘the wickedness of British American slavery clinched the case against colonial self-governance.’ American rebels who, ‘contending so nobly for the natural equality of mankind, hold near half a million of negroes in perpetual bondage’, were motivated by principles of ‘profligacy, Atheism, ingratitude, and oppression’ that ‘must naturally end in absolute tyranny, or... a contemptible oppressive oligarchy.’⁵⁴

Reforming slavery would therefore necessarily be part of a larger project of restructuring the empire along more centralised and authoritarian lines. ‘True liberty’ in Ramsay’s view was necessarily conditional, insofar as members of the community

⁵¹ Debate in the Commons on Mr. Hartley’s Propositions for Conciliation with America, 7 December 1775, Cobbett & Hansard, eds., *Parliamentary History*, 18:1049; Brown, *Moral Capital*, 146–7.

⁵² John Lind, *An Answer to the Declaration of the American Congress* (2nd edn., London, 1776), 107 (Lind’s emphasis); Brown, *Moral Capital*, 129–34.

⁵³ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 228, 229, n. 28.

⁵⁴ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 249; [James Ramsay], *Plan of Re-Union between Great Britain and Her Colonies* (London, 1778), 125, 52–3, n.

must recognise that they were organically and reciprocally bound together within ‘the natural unity of the state.’ To mediate their interests, and so facilitate ‘the advancement of the common good’ was ‘the sole responsibility’ of ‘properly constituted authority.’⁵⁵ That authority resided exclusively with parliament and the sovereign, not ‘the absurdity and contradiction of various, jarring legislators’ in the colonies, who had shown themselves ‘neither competent, or inclined, to introduce such legislation as humanity solicits.’

Ramsay hoped that British victory in North America would provide ‘an opportunity of annulling all the little colony-systems, and extending that indiscriminating supremacy of law, which takes place in Albion alone.’⁵⁶ In the event, however, it was only in the wake of American independence that abolitionism would take off in Britain as a serious movement. The war cast previously unquestioned assumptions about British liberty in a novel and unflattering light. The trauma of defeat undermined the existing political order, and lent additional impetus to demands for reform. For those of a religious mindset, such as Granville Sharp, the war’s outcome could easily be interpreted as an alarming sign of divine disfavour, and an apocalyptic harbinger of worse punishment to come.⁵⁷

Sentiments like this helped to make a moderate and respectable abolitionism (directed, of course, primarily at the transatlantic slave trade) seem like a timely, feasible and prudent step to wide sections of public and political opinion by the 1780s. The campaign served to reaffirm the nation’s benevolence and commitment to liberty, whilst also validating the legitimacy and representative capacity of parliament. With (cautious) support at the highest levels of government, and led largely by the likes of Ramsay and Wilberforce, people possessed of ‘an almost obsessive concern with idealizing hierarchical order’, abolitionism was a respectable and relatively safe outlet for the popular appetite for reform, offering ‘a mode of political participation which did not directly threaten the sources or structure of political power.’⁵⁸

By advancing the process initiated by Sharp of ‘converting antislavery into a defence of traditional authority’, therefore, the American Revolution helped to make

⁵⁵ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 248–50.

⁵⁶ [Ramsay], *Plan of Re-Union*, xv.

⁵⁷ Blackburn, *Overthrow*, 133–4; Brown, *Moral Capital*, 179–82; Colley, *Britons*, 354.

⁵⁸ Davis, *Age of Revolution*, 377, 363.

abolitionism in the British empire a politically plausible project.⁵⁹ The ultimate extinction of British slavery was far from certain in the 1780s, but the institution would henceforth be subject to unprecedented challenge and scrutiny from the metropole.

However, amidst the chaotic, multi-focal, ‘self-intensifying’ process of revolution itself,⁶⁰ the rulers of the British empire had briefly contemplated more immediate and drastic action. A month before Hartley’s proposal was defeated in the House of Commons, another man for whom, like Ramsay, ‘denunciation of colonial slavery implied no taste for a freer or more equal society’, had made common cause with another group of Americans contemplating ‘the alternative of chusing an unconditional submission... or resistance by force’.⁶¹ In November 1775, John Murray, earl of Dunmore and royal governor of Virginia, proclaimed ‘all indented Servants, Negroes, or others... free that are able and willing to bear Arms... for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper sense of their Duty, to His Majesty’s Crown and Dignity.’ The following month, Dunmore’s ‘Ethiopian Regiment’ of liberated slaves, nearly 300 strong, fought the Virginia militia at the battle of Great Bridge. By the time Dunmore abandoned the Chesapeake in July 1776, between 800 and 1,000 African Americans had answered his proclamation.⁶² Many more would escape from slavery to seek the protection of the royal armies in the course of the Revolutionary War; in total, perhaps as many as 30,000 black people served as soldiers, sailors, and in various auxiliary roles in North America and the Caribbean.⁶³ With the end of the conflict, they would struggle to make good the promise of freedom for which they had risked and suffered so much.

⁵⁹ Davis, *Age of Revolution*, 375; Brown, *Moral Capital*, 113–6; 151–3, 160–61. This view is strongly disputed, though without offering an alternative explanation for the timing of abolitionism’s initial breakthrough, in Drescher, *Abolition*, 121–4, 206–18.

⁶⁰ Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 231–2; for a perceptive discussion of the ‘non-linear dynamics’ and ‘spontaneous self-organization’ of the American and other revolutions see Langley, *Americas in the Age of Revolution*, 1–10.

⁶¹ Davis, *Age of Revolution*, 377; ‘Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms’, 6 July 1775, Boyd et al., eds., *Jefferson Papers*, 1:217.

⁶² Proclamation by Lord Dunmore, 7 November 1775, CO5/1353/335; Dunmore to General Howe, 30 November 1775, in Peter Force, ed., *American Archives... A documentary history of... the North American colonies*, 4th ser., 6 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1837–46), 3:1713–5; Benjamin Quarles, ‘Lord Dunmore as Liberator’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 15:4 (October 1958), 502–6; Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 78–86, 89–91.

⁶³ Philip D. Morgan & Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, ‘Arming Slaves in the American Revolution’, in Christopher Leslie Brown & Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Arming Slaves: From classical times to the modern age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 198–9.

II: 'Like a Snow Ball in Rolling...': Slavery, War, and Freedom in Revolutionary America

The confusion and inconsistency of the British stance towards enslaved African Americans during the American Revolutionary War and the imperial crisis that led up to it paralleled the ambiguous and contradictory position of slavery in an empire avowedly devoted to freedom. From 1775 onwards, many British politicians, soldiers and imperial officials increasingly came to perceive slavery as a potential American weakness, that might be exploited to secure both moral and strategic high ground. Government-sponsored pamphleteers could cast the colonists as hypocrites merely by drawing attention 'to the *slaves* of these assertors of liberty.' Reliance on the labour of a large and disaffected servile class rendered the Southern colonies, in particular, potentially vulnerable to wartime economic dislocation and social upheaval.⁶⁴ But on the other hand, well-established practical and ideological concerns mitigated against interfering with American slavery: fear of exacerbating the ubiquitous danger of revolt in the West Indies; the voices of powerful interest groups at home and in the loyal colonies; ties of racial solidarity to the people still widely thought of as 'our *American brethren*';⁶⁵ and the risk of alienating loyal Americans who were often slaveholders themselves.

In practice, it frequently proved hard to formulate any specific or coherent policy when ministers in London were barely able to keep pace with the rapidly unfolding and constantly shifting course of developments in America. The concentration of military efforts on the South from 1778 was clearly informed in part by the widespread assumption that the presence of so many slaves in Georgia, the Chesapeake and the Carolinas would discourage and inhibit colonial resistance. Ultimately, of course, such a strategy was 'practical rather than moral', but the British were rarely in a position to play a machiavellian role, coldly and cynically calculating how to best take advantage of the aspirations of enslaved African Americans.⁶⁶ More often, their actions were essentially improvised and opportunistic responses to the

⁶⁴ Lind, *Answer*, 107 (emphasis in original); on slavery in the colonial American South see Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 5–44; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*.

⁶⁵ 'Address, Memorial and Petition of the Gentlemen, Merchants and Traders of London', 11 October 1775, Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th ser., 3:1011 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁶ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 63.

urgent contingencies of a situation with a volatile and unpredictable momentum of its own. Much depended on the initiatives of commanders on the ground, some of whom showed far more enthusiasm for subverting and undermining American slavery than did the government they represented. But at times, the dynamic trajectory of revolution, fuelled by a complex interplay of slave unrest, tension, rumour, confusion, and deep-rooted social and racial anxieties, threatened to overwhelm the capacity of its individual protagonists to shape the course of events. At critical phases, such as the invasions of Georgia and South Carolina in 1778–9, and above all in the period between the winter of 1774–5 and the Declaration of Independence, it was frequently the slaves themselves, ostensibly the participants with the least freedom of action, who seemed to be most effective at manipulating developments to suit their own ends.

From late in 1774, as the imperial crisis advanced towards its denouement in the wake of the Coercive Acts, there were reports of disturbing behaviour by slaves in both Northern and Southern colonies. In September, African Americans in Boston were said to have ‘got an Irishman to draw up a petition’ addressed to the city’s recently appointed governor, General Thomas Gage, commander-in-chief of British forces in North America. They offered to ‘fight for him, provided he would arm them and engage to liberate them if he conquered.’ A month later, James Madison related how slaves in one Virginia county had ‘met together & chose a leader who was to conduct them when the English Troops should arrive – which they foolishly thought would be very soon & that by revolting to them they should be rewarded with their freedom.’ Discussing the importance of ‘proper precautions... to prevent the Infection’, Madison considered it ‘prudent such attempts should be concealed as well as suppressed.’⁶⁷

Actual risings were harder to keep secret: in December, two slaves were burned alive for leading a revolt in St. Andrew parish, Georgia, in which at least seven whites were killed or seriously wounded.⁶⁸ Around the same time, ominous rumours began to circulate concerning British intentions towards American slaves. In

⁶⁷ Abigail Adams to John Adams, Boston, 24 September 1774, *Familiar Letters of John Adams and his wife Abigail Adams, During the Revolution. With a Memoir of Mrs. Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (New York, 1876), 23; James Madison to William Bradford, Virginia, 26 November 1774, William T. Hutchinson & William M. E. Rachal, eds., *The Papers of James Madison, Congressional Series*, 17 vols. (Chicago/ Charlottesville: University of Chicago Press/ University Press of Virginia, 1962–1991), 1:129–30.

⁶⁸ Wood, “‘Liberty is Sweet’”, 161.

November, Sir William Draper had suggested in the London *Public Advertiser* that in the event of an American ‘attempt to debauch our Seamen and Soldiers by Premiums to encourage Desertion’, Britain might ‘Proclame *Freedom* to their Negroes, then how long would they be a People?’⁶⁹ Although Draper was a British officer, who had actually commanded African slave troops raised by the East India Company during the expedition to capture Manila in 1762,⁷⁰ his remarks seem to have been no more than a typical rhetorical swipe at colonial slaveholders, and were certainly a long way from being a fully worked-out proposal. Nevertheless, exaggerated reports of them generated alarm across the Atlantic. In December, Virginian Arthur Lee wrote from London to his brother Richard Henry Lee that the idea ‘meets with approbation from ministerial People.’ The following month, William Bradford advised Madison that his ‘fear with regard to an insurrection being excited among the slaves seems too well founded.’ Evidence that ‘such a scheme is thought on & talked of’ had appeared in the form of ‘a letter from a Gentleman in England... read yesterday in the Coffee-house, which mentioned the design of administration to pass an act (in case of a rupture) declaring [“]all Slaves & Servants free that would take arms against the Americans.’”⁷¹

Reports of such a plan continued to circulate in the months that followed, spreading an anxiety among whites that helped to validate the hopes and expectations of slaves themselves, and made it harder for British officials to ignore the potential of the idea. This process quickly took on a momentum of its own, as these developments fed back into and lent weight to the original rumours.

In his speech for conciliation of March 1775, Burke claimed to the House of Commons that ‘it has been proposed, I know,’ to subdue ‘the high aristocratick spirit of Virginia and the Southern Colonies... by declaring a general enfranchisement of

⁶⁹ Letter from ‘Viator’, *Public Advertiser*, 25 November 1774 (emphasis in original); Draper’s pieces on the American crisis were later reprinted as *The Thoughts of a Traveller upon our American Disputes* (London, 1774).

⁷⁰ P. J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America, c. 1750–1783* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 61.

⁷¹ Arthur Lee to Richard Henry Lee, 6 December 1774, quoted in Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, debtors, slaves and the making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 140; Bradford to Madison, Philadelphia, 4 January 1775, Hutchinson & Rachal, eds., *Papers of James Madison*, 1:132. Draper was identified as the author of a ‘scheme’ to send ‘20,000 Swiss... over to cut the throats of our fellow subjects in America in conjunction with the Negroes who were to be emancipated to slaughter their masters’ in the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 29 July 1775.

their slaves.’ Around the same time, General Gage had warned John Stuart, Indian superintendent for the Southern District, that if South Carolinians were to ‘proceed much greater lengths it may happen that your Rice and Indigo will be brought to market by negroes instead of white People—’.⁷²

By the spring, the actions of blacks in Virginia were helping to propel the deteriorating relations between the governor and the colonists to crisis point. In April, several slaves were hanged in connection with conspiracies in four different counties. On the 21st, two days after the fighting at Lexington and Concord, Governor Dunmore sent a detachment of sailors to seize powder from the Williamsburg magazine, on the grounds of ‘the apprehensions which seemed to prevail throughout this whole Country, of an intended insurrection of the Slaves, who had been seen in large numbers in the night time about the Magazine’. The next day, an angry and armed crowd gathered outside the gubernatorial palace. An enraged Dunmore then ‘swore by the living God that... if any Injury or insult was offered to himself... he would declare Freedom to the Slaves, and reduce the City of Williamsburg to Ashes.’ Already, ‘some Negroes (by one of his Servants) had offered their Service’. As paramilitary independent companies appeared across the colony, prospects of reconciliation between Dunmore and the ‘greatly alarmed and exasperated’ Virginian whites rapidly receded. On 1 May, Dunmore advised Secretary of State Lord Dartmouth that in the event of violent resistance to his authority, it was his ‘fixed purpose to arm all my own Negroes and receive all others that will come to me whom I shall declare free’. He was confident that ‘I could raise such a force from among Indians, Negroes and other persons as would soon reduce the refractory people of this colony to obedience’.⁷³

South Carolina, hitherto seemingly the colony least inclined towards open rebellion against the crown, was thrown into uproar by the arrival on 3 May of a letter from Arthur Lee describing a ‘black plan before Administration’ to ‘grant freedom to

⁷² Burke, *Conciliation*, 26; Gage to Stuart, c. Feb/ March 1775, quoted in John Richard Alden, ‘John Stuart Accuses William Bull’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 2:3 (July 1945), 318.

⁷³ Holton, *Forced Founders*, 141–6; Proclamation by Lord Dunmore, Williamsburg, 3 May 1775, Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th ser., 2:465; Report of ‘the Committee appointed to Inquire into the causes of the late disturbances and Commotions’, 14 June 1775, John Pendleton Kennedy, ed., *Journal of the House of Burgesses of Virginia 1773–1776* (Richmond, 1905), xix, 231–4; Dunmore to Dartmouth, Williamsburg, 1 May 1775, in K. G. Davies, ed., *Documents of the American Revolution 1770–1783*, 21 vols. (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972–81), 9:109–10.

such Slaves as should desert their Masters and join the King's troops'.⁷⁴ On the 29th, the *South Carolina Gazette* printed a letter from London dated 10 February, claiming that 'there is gone down to Sheerness, seventy-eight thousand guns and bayonets, to be sent to America, to put into the hands of N****s, the Roman Catholics, the Indians and Canadians.' Charleston was awash with rumours that the ship bringing the new royal governor, Lord William Campbell, was also carrying 14,000 muskets, to be issued to slaves who were to be incited to revolt.⁷⁵

Word of Dunmore's threat had spread across the South by early June, and 'the dread of Instigated Insurrections' reached new heights during the summer.⁷⁶ As armed militia patrolled the streets of Charleston day and night, de facto political control shifted from the royal authorities, suspected of complicity, to the Provincial Congress and Charleston General Committee 'in an instant, without violence or debate'.⁷⁷ A free black pilot, Thomas Jeremiah, was arrested for alleged collusion with the British. At his trial in August, witnesses reported that in May or June, Jeremiah had spoken to other African Americans of 'the great war coming soon... to help the poor Negroes', and had tried to send arms to a runaway in preparation for a rebellion.⁷⁸

In St. Bartholomew parish of South Carolina's Chehaw County, at the beginning of July, a court of 'Justices & Freeholders... were under the disagreeable necessity to Cause Exemplary punish[en]ts' to be inflicted on the 'Principal leaders' of an 'Infernal design' for 'a General Insurrection'. These 'leaders' were a group of slaves who had 'been preaching for two Years last past to Great crouds of Negroes.'

⁷⁴ Robert A. Olwell, "'Domestick Enemies': Slavery and political independence in South Carolina, May 1775–March 1776", *JSH*, 55:1 (February 1989), 21; John Drayton, *Memoirs of the American Revolution, from its commencement to the year 1776, inclusive*, 2 vols. (Charleston, 1821), 1:231; Charleston General Committee to South Carolina Delegates at Philadelphia, 8 May 1775, in David R. Chesnut et al., eds., *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 16 vols. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968–2003), 10:114, n. 2 (first quotation); Alexander Innes to Dartmouth, Charles Town, 16 May 1775, in B. D. Bagar, 'Charles Town Loyalism in 1775: The secret reports of Alexander Innes', *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 63:3 (July 1962), 128 (second quotation).

⁷⁵ *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 May 1775, quoted in Olwell, "'Domestick Enemies'", 30; Campbell to Dartmouth, 31 August 1775, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 11:94.

⁷⁶ Henry Laurens to John Laurens, Charles Town, 15 May 1775, quoting text of the 'Association' adopted by the 'General Committee' on 10 May, Chesnut et al., eds., *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 10:118; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 60.

⁷⁷ Olwell, "'Domestick Enemies'", 35; Peter H. Wood, "'Taking Care of Business' in Revolutionary South Carolina: Republicanism and the slave society", in Jeffrey J. Crow & Larry E. Tise, eds., *The Southern Experience in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 281–2.

⁷⁸ Wood, "'Liberty is Sweet'", 167–8; trial testimony quoted in *ibid.*

One of these preachers, George, was heard to say that ‘the old King had rece[ive]d a Book from our Lord by which he was to Alter the World (meaning to set the Negroes free) but for his not doing so, was now gone to Hell.’ But now, ‘the Young King, meaning our Present One... was about to alter the World, & set the Negroes Free.’⁷⁹

Around the same time, ‘a deep laid Horrid Tragick Plan’ was discovered in North Carolina. Slaves in the Tar River area had planned to rise on 8 July, killing their masters and burning houses as they went, until they reached ‘the Back Country where they were to be received with open arms by a number of Persons there appointed and armed by Government for their Protection, and as a further reward they were to be settled in a free government of their own.’ Claims that Governor Josiah Martin ‘had formed a design of arming the Negroes and proclaiming freedom to all such as would resort to the King’s standard’ were rife. The commander of Fort Johnston on Cape Fear was alleged to have ‘given Encouragement to Negroes to Elope from their Masters &... promised to protect them.’ Martin had done little to dispel such rumours with his insistence that ‘nothing could ever justify the design, falsely imputed to me, of giving encouragement to the negroes, but the actual and declared rebellion of the King’s subjects.’⁸⁰

As with almost all slave conspiracies, a definitive assessment of the true scope and motivation of would-be rebels in 1774–5 is impossible; the sources inevitably shed a great deal more light upon how whites responded to their own fears, rather than ‘their slaves’ unfathomed purposes’.⁸¹ In South Carolina, especially, the insurrection scares do seem to have at least partly conformed to Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s formulation of a ‘mass ritual’ serving as ‘a celebration of white solidarity’, in the context of acute political tensions.⁸² Nonetheless, that thousands of African Americans did fight for their freedom during the Revolutionary War lends credence to the view that at least some of these incidents were rather more substantive affairs.

⁷⁹ Thomas Hutchinson to Council of Safety, Chehaw, 5 July 1775, Chesnutt et al., eds., *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 10:206–8.

⁸⁰ Colonel Simpson to Colonel Cogdell, 15 July 1775, & Wilmington Safety Committee to Samuel Johnston, 13 July 1775, quoted in Jeffrey J. Crow, ‘Slave Rebelliousness and Social Conflict in North Carolina, 1775 to 1802’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 37:1 (January 1980), 86, 83–4; Martin to Dartmouth, 30 June 1775, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 9:211; Martin to DeRosset, 24 June 1775, Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th ser., 3:8.

⁸¹ Walter Johnson, ‘Time and Revolution in African America: Temporality and the history of Atlantic slavery’, in Wilson, ed., *New Imperial History*, 209.

⁸² Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and behavior in the Old South* (New York: OUP, 1982), 402–7.

Some historians have suggested that ‘there is every reason to suppose that [slaves] had access to revolutionary ideology’, and perhaps even that they ‘were swept up by the force of ideological energy.’ While there is no doubt that many African Americans were aware of colonial assertions of principles of natural rights and equality, and denunciations of British tyranny and designs of ‘enslavement’, the evidence is rather more ambiguous regarding how black people interpreted such rhetoric. Although slaves in Massachusetts repeatedly couched petitions for freedom in terms of Patriot discourse, elsewhere, rather than ‘yearning to become fully American’, black people proved more likely to identify the agents of royal oppression as possible allies in their own struggle for freedom.⁸³

Indeed, not only did African Americans repeatedly aver their readiness to support the British cause, they did so well in advance of any positive indications of British receptiveness to such overtures. In all likelihood, many slaves proceeded on the calculation that an enemy of the slaveholders was a potential friend. Precisely because the odds were invariably stacked so heavily against rebel slaves, plausible claims of external succour were often invaluable tools for mobilising support for any such undertaking. In particular, the idea of fighting as part of an established army was a far more attractive proposition than the usually suicidal course of insurrection.

Stories of various kinds of royal sympathy and support appear again and again in the background to slave revolts across the Atlantic world. The ‘bizarre royalism displayed by many of the slave insurgents’ during the first phase of the Haitian Revolution presents perhaps the most obvious parallel with the American Revolution.⁸⁴ Both apparently fictitious, and more or less mythologised versions of real monarchs, such as George’s ‘Young King’, could serve as foci of this recurring phenomenon, which has been often noted, but never really satisfactorily accounted

⁸³ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 49–51; Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 18–21; Kaplan, “‘Domestic Insurrections’”, 249; Nash, *Unknown American Revolution*, 150.

⁸⁴ Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 36, 62–6; see also idem, ‘The French and Haitian Revolutions, and Resistance to Slavery in the Americas: an Overview’, *Revue Française d’Histoire d’Outre-mer*, 76 (1989), 116–7; idem, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 43, 199, 303, 442, n. 165; Dubois, *Avengers*, 106–9; Gene E. Ogle, ‘The Trans-Atlantic King and Imperial Public Spheres: Everyday politics in pre-revolutionary Saint-Domingue’, in Geggus & Fiering, eds., *World of the Haitian Revolution*, 79–96.

for.⁸⁵ The influence of African concepts of kingship is a tantalising idea, albeit one for which ‘explicit evidence is lacking.’⁸⁶ Comparisons can be drawn with ‘revolutionary traditionalists’ elsewhere, such as those in nineteenth-century Naples who fought ‘not for the *reality* of the Bourbon kingdom... but for the ideal of the “good old” society naturally symbolized by the ideal of the... “good old” king.’⁸⁷

From the perspective of the enslaved, it is easy to imagine the allure of the idea of a royal authority, standing above and beyond that of the slaveholding class, and thereby refuting the latter’s pretensions to absolute and unlimited power. In styling themselves as subjects of the king, slaves asserted the qualified and subordinate nature of masters’ claims over them.⁸⁸ Of course, such thinking chimed closely with the British attitudes towards the structure of power and the role of non-whites within the empire that had been developing since the 1760s. Thus, when African Americans professed their adherence to a benign and paternal monarch in the 1770s, many British officials found it easier to take them seriously.

By the summer of 1775, as rumours of slave rebellion contributed to the rapid deterioration of royal authority in the South, Gage warned London that ‘things are now come to that Crisis, that we must avail ourselves of every resource, even to raise the Negroes in our cause.’⁸⁹ Dunmore had already abandoned Williamsburg for a man-of-war at Yorktown, where he was quietly welcoming runaway slaves.⁹⁰ In July, the Continental Congress listed ‘Schemes... formed to excite Domestick Enemies against

⁸⁵ For various examples and discussion see Scott, ‘The Common Wind’, 116–8, 151–8, 224–5; Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 244–5, 280–81, 295–6; Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara slave revolt of 1823* (New York: OUP, 1994), 177–85; A. J. R. Russell-Wood, ‘“Acts of Grace”: Portuguese monarchs and their subjects of African descent in eighteenth-century Brazil’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 32:2 (May 2000), 307–322; Michael Craton, ‘Slave Culture, Resistance and the Achievement of Emancipation in the British West Indies, 1783–1838’, in Walvin, ed., *Slavery and British Society*, 103–6. Brendan McConville presents this phenomenon in terms of a generalised culture of royalism in eighteenth-century British America in *The King’s Three Faces: The rise and fall of royal America, 1688–1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 175–82; however, this interpretation necessarily cannot account for the Atlantic scope of ‘slave royalism.’

⁸⁶ John K. Thornton, ‘“I am the Subject of the King of Congo”: African political ideology and the Haitian Revolution’, *Journal of World History*, 4:2 (Fall 1993), 181–214 (quotation at 206).

⁸⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 27 (emphasis in original).

⁸⁸ Cf. David Brion Davis’s description of the anxieties of French planters in the 1790s regarding proposals for metropolitan regulation of slavery in *Age of Revolution*, 190: ‘if French slaves should ever suspect that their fate could be governed by an authority independent of the will of their masters... then France would have no hope of preserving her colonies.’

⁸⁹ Gage to Barrington, 12 June 1775, quoted in Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 60.

⁹⁰ Dunmore to Dartmouth, 25 June 1775, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 9:205.

us' in its list of grievances justifying the colonists' resort to force. A month later, another letter from London to Philadelphia claimed that 'the Ministry have thoughts of declaring all your negroes free, and to arm them.'⁹¹

Thus far, the British government had made no public response to the proposals coming from the likes of Gage and Dunmore. Apparently the first airing of a definite metropolitan proposal to strike at colonial slavery came as late as October, when William Henry Lyttleton, former governor of South Carolina and Jamaica, told the House of Commons that he 'was against any conciliatory offers being made', since 'the honour of the nation required coercive measures' for 'strengthening the hands of government'. Observing that 'the southern colonies... were weak, on account of the number of negroes in them', he suggested that 'if a few regiments were sent there, the negroes would rise, and embroe their hands in the blood of their masters.'⁹²

Lyttleton's sanguinary assessment of the prospects for military intervention in the South was echoed by the 'melancholly Account of the State of Georgia and S. Carolina' related to John Adams in September. Two Georgians warned Adams that, were the commander of a token British expeditionary force to 'proclaim Freedom to all the Negroes who would join his Camp, 20,000 Negroes would join it from the two Provinces in a fortnight.'⁹³

By November, Dunmore was ready to put such predictions to the test. Following a successful skirmish at Kemp's Landing, on the 14th he finally issued the proclamation written a week earlier, and openly embarked on the course he had been contemplating and threatening since the end of April.⁹⁴ As the seeming confirmation of a year's worth of ever-more intense speculation, expectation and dread, Dunmore's proclamation had an electrifying effect on whites and blacks across North America. Several hundred slaves had reached him by December. Three luckless runaways were hanged after boarding what they mistakenly thought was a British ship, and professing

⁹¹ 'Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms', 6 July 1775, Boyd et al., eds., *Jefferson Papers*, 1:217; 'Extract of a Letter Received in Philadelphia', 24 August 1775, Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th ser., 3:256.

⁹² Debate in the House of Commons on the Address of Thanks, 26 October 1775, Cobbett & Hansard, eds., *Parliamentary History*, 18:733.

⁹³ Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 2:182-3.

⁹⁴ Dunmore to Dartmouth, 6 December 1775, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 12:58-9; Quarles, 'Lord Dunmore as Liberator', 497-8.

‘their resolution to spend the last drop of *their blood* in lord *Dunmore’s* service.’⁹⁵ A widely reprinted story from Philadelphia related how an African American had refused to yield the pavement to a white woman, telling her ‘Stay, you d—d white bitch, till Lord Dunmore and his black regiment come, and then we will see who is to take the wall.’⁹⁶

The *Virginia Gazette* declared that ‘not in the legions of horrid hell, can come a devil more damn’d in evils, to top D*****e.’ His actions were branded ‘treason against the State’ by one Virginian, ‘for which such men as Lord Dunmore, and even Kings, have lost their heads.’⁹⁷ George Washington declared Dunmore an ‘Arch Traitor to the Rights of Humanity,’ driven by ‘motives of Resentment... to a degree equal to the total destruction of the Colony.’ Edmund Rutledge took the view that the proclamation served ‘more effectually to work an eternal separation between Great Britain and the Colonies,— than any other expedient, which could possibly have been thought of.’⁹⁸

His status as ‘the first full-fledged villain’ of ‘American patriotic tradition’ has cast a long shadow over historical assessments of Dunmore.⁹⁹ For a long time, the Revolutionary generation’s verdict received an uncritical echo in American historiography. George Bancroft concluded that ‘no royal governor showed more rapacity in the use of official power’. C. R. Lingley considered him ‘a pedant, a

⁹⁵ Purdie’s *Virginia Gazette*, 29 March, 1776, quoted in Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave resistance in eighteenth-century Virginia* (New York: OUP, 1972), 133 (emphasis in original).

⁹⁶ *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 14 December 1775; this anecdote is also cited to Purdie’s *Virginia Gazette* and the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* in Patricia Bradley, *Slavery, Propaganda and the American Revolution* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 143, and Nash, *Unknown American Revolution*, 162, respectively. For further instances of the widespread black awareness of, and response to Dunmore’s proclamation see Mary Beth Norton, ‘“What an Alarming Crisis Is This”: Southern women and the American Revolution’, in Crow & Tise, eds., *Southern Experience*, 217–8; Peter H. Wood, ‘“The Dream Deferred”: Black freedom struggles on the eve of white independence’, in Gary Y. Okihiro, ed., *In Resistance: Studies in African, Caribbean, and Afro-American history* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 177–8; Ray Raphael, *The American Revolution: A people’s history* (London: Profile, 2001), 254–61, 359–60, n. 62.

⁹⁷ Purdie’s *Virginia Gazette*, 24 November 1775, quoted in Michael A. McDonnell, *The Politics of War: Race, class, and conflict in Revolutionary Virginia* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 135; Anon. letter, Williamsburg, 30 November 1775, Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th ser., 3:1387.

⁹⁸ Washington to Lt. Col. Joseph Reed, Cambridge, 15 December 1775, Washington to Richard Henry Lee, 26 December 1775, in Philander D. Chase, ed., *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 16 vols. to date (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985–), 2:553, 611; Rutledge to Izard, 8 December 1775, in *Correspondence of Mr. Ralph Izard of South Carolina* (New York, 1844; repr. New York: AMS, 1976), 144.

⁹⁹ Quarles, ‘Lord Dunmore as Liberator’, 494.

cynic, barbarous in manners and sentiments, lacking in genius, irreligious, coarse and depraved.’¹⁰⁰ More recent scholarship generally either sidesteps the question of motivation,¹⁰¹ or has been at pains to stress how the ‘orthodox mind’ of this ‘standard issue Scots-Hanoverian imperialist [was] handicapped by a rigid sense of duty, [and] a political tin ear’.¹⁰² He offered freedom to slaves, but ‘Dunmore was no champion of emancipation’; his actions were ‘rooted in expediency rather than humanitarian zeal.’¹⁰³ Even in the context of a more or less explicit apologia for the British empire’s involvement in Atlantic slavery, the best that Niall Ferguson can find to say about Dunmore is that his offer of freedom to black Virginians ‘was not entirely opportunistic.’¹⁰⁴ Most recently, Philip D. Morgan and Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy have played down his significance, arguing that when ‘considered in context, Lord Dunmore’s famous proclamation... represented the culmination of an existing trend rather than a dramatic departure,’ and that ‘furthermore, it was not a particularly radical statement.’¹⁰⁵

Of course, the notion of arming slaves did not originate with Dunmore, even, as we have seen, in the context of the American Revolution. Nor was he in any sense a rogue agent pursuing a maverick approach of his own; he informed both Gage and the Secretary of State of what he intended well in advance of the proclamation, and there is no evidence that either disapproved or tried to stop him. Dunmore was necessarily acting largely on his own initiative, but he did so from a frame of reference consistent with significant currents in the mainstream of imperial policy. His assessment of the situation facing him in 1775 resembled that of Gage and other British officials, who were themselves moving towards comparable responses. In turn, the increasing willingness of such individuals to consider a strategy of appealing to and mobilising slave dissent should be understood in light of the ways that British attitudes to empire and to slavery had developed over the preceding decade. Although some Britons, especially those with commercial ties to the Atlantic slave system, professed shock

¹⁰⁰ Both quoted in Coke, *Royal Commission*, 211.

¹⁰¹ See for example Quarles, ‘Lord Dunmore as Liberator’; Wood, “‘Liberty is Sweet’”.

¹⁰² Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 136; Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 75.

¹⁰³ Sylvia R. Frey, ‘Between Slavery and Freedom: Virginia blacks in the American Revolution’, *JSH*, 49:3 (August 1983), 387; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 63.

¹⁰⁴ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain made the modern world* (London: Penguin 2004 edn.), 101.

¹⁰⁵ Morgan & O’Shaughnessy, ‘Arming Slaves in the American Revolution’, 189.

and outrage at the arming of slaves, people such as Lind and Ramsay insisted that ‘the rebellion of America, against the laws and rights of the mother-country... cuts off every pretence of complaint, for their slaves having been stirred up against them.’¹⁰⁶

Nevertheless, Dunmore was surely the most enthusiastic British advocate of turning enslaved African Americans into the king’s soldiers during the Revolutionary War. Of course, he was the first to actually do so, and although the approaches of black Virginians in April 1775 drew his attention to the possibility, there are also hints that the idea may have taken shape in his imagination over a much longer period. In 1772, he had observed that Virginia’s slave population were ‘attached by no tie to their masters or to the country’, and that therefore ‘it is natural to suppose their condition must inspire them with an aversion to both, and therefore are ready to join the first that would encourage them to revenge themselves’. He noted that ‘the people with great reason tremble at the facility that an enemy would find in procuring such a body of men... by which means a conquest of this country would inevitably be effected in a very short time.’¹⁰⁷

Morgan and O’Shaughnessy are undoubtedly justified in emphasising the longstanding precedents for the military use of slaves, and as they observe, the practice was actually more common in the Caribbean than on the mainland during the Revolutionary War.¹⁰⁸ But Dunmore’s proclamation was surely a far more drastic step. It was one thing to conscript trusted slaves, usually with their masters’ consent, either for service overseas or to defend a colony against foreign invasion. It was quite another to declare them free, and incite them to run away from owners who were ostensibly fellow Britons. And it was still another to have them take up arms against those owners, wearing uniforms inscribed with the potent slogan ‘Liberty to Slaves’.¹⁰⁹ Dunmore directly acknowledged and invoked African-American desires both for freedom, and the chance ‘to revenge themselves’, in a way that would be inconceivable in the West Indies before the Haitian Revolution.

¹⁰⁶ [Ramsay], *Plan of Re-Union*, 125; cf. Lind, *Answer*, 107. For an example of the opposite response see ‘The Humble Address, Memorial and Petition of the Gentlemen, Merchants and Traders of London’, 11 October 1775, Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th ser., 3:1011.

¹⁰⁷ Dunmore to Earl of Hillsborough, 1 May 1772, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 5:94–5.

¹⁰⁸ Morgan & O’Shaughnessy, ‘Arming Slaves in the American Revolution’, 180–89, 194–8; see also O’Shaughnessy, *Empire Divided*, 174–81; Roger Norman Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: the British West India Regiments, 1795–1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 1–4.

¹⁰⁹ Quarles, ‘Lord Dunmore as Liberator’, 502–3.

Far from being someone who simply ‘could not comprehend the scope of the Revolution in Virginia,’¹¹⁰ the strategy that Dunmore pursued in 1775 demonstrated a nuanced grasp of the dynamics and tensions at work in Virginian society. As he observed to Dartmouth, with evident satisfaction, threatening the colonists with the arming of slaves had ‘stirred up fears in them which cannot easily subside, as they know how vulnerable they are in that particular.’ This weakness was acknowledged a few days later by James Madison, who warned that ‘if we should be subdued, we shall fall like Achilles by the hand of one that knows that secret.’¹¹¹ But Dunmore was not concerned exclusively with slaves; it is easily forgotten that his proclamation was also addressed to the indentured servants who constituted the bottom tier of white Virginian society. In December 1774, he had predicted that the ‘middling and poorer sort’ of colonists ‘will suffer much sooner’ than the ‘people... of fortune’ from the effects of the embargo on trade with Britain. He expected that ‘the lower class of people... will discover that they have been duped by the richer sort’, who might be inclined towards ‘taking the shortest mode of supplying themselves’. The ‘quarrels and dissensions’ that would result might well ‘raise partisans of government.’¹¹²

Michael McDonnell, noting how the Revolutionary situation generated political divisions that overlaid and reinforced existing class tensions, suggests that ‘among the very lowest class of whites, Dunmore’s Proclamation was perhaps even more welcomed.’¹¹³ Certainly, the manager of George Washington’s Mount Vernon plantation was confident that ‘if there was no white Serv[an]ts in this Family I should be under no apprehension about the Slaves’. Washington himself succinctly expressed the anxieties of the Virginian elite. His great fear was that if Dunmore was not ‘instantly crushed’, then ‘like a snow Ball in rolling, his army will get size—some through fear—some through promises—and some from inclination joining his Standard.’ But in this well-known passage, Washington refers to what he considered to be the principal and immediate threat, that of poorer whites joining the governor. He only then went on to warn that ‘that which renders the measure indispensably necessary, is,

¹¹⁰ Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 136.

¹¹¹ Dunmore to Dartmouth, 12 June 1775, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 9:204; Madison to Bradford, 19 June 1775, Hutchinson & Rachal, eds., *Papers of James Madison*, 1:153.

¹¹² Dunmore to Dartmouth, 24 December 1774, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745–1799*, 39 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1931–44), 3:249, n. 94.

¹¹³ McDonnell, *Politics of War*, 144.

the Negroes; for *if he gets* formidable, numbers of th[e]m will be tempted to join who will be affraid to do it without.’¹¹⁴

Hence, for Washington, the ultimate danger was that the disaffection of plebeian whites would catalyse the escalation of slave resistance. In this way, Dunmore’s proclamation raised the spectre of a multi-racial lower class coalition that had haunted the imaginations of Virginia’s rulers since the time of Bacon’s Rebellion,¹¹⁵ and which had a wider resonance in the context of Patriot fears regarding Tory-directed mobs composed of the ‘lower sort,’ both black and white.¹¹⁶ It was this prospect that underpinned Washington’s belief that ‘if... that Man is not crushed before Spring, he will become the most formidable Enemy America has,’ and that ‘the fate of America a good deal depends on his being obliged to Evacuate Norfolk this Winter.’¹¹⁷

Although the proclamation ‘set off a complex chain of events that precipitated a major crisis for patriot leaders’, directly fuelling intense concern over the loyalties of poorer whites on Maryland’s Eastern Shore as well as in Virginia, Dunmore ultimately failed to make good Washington’s dire predictions. Through a vigorous campaign of threats, misinformation and exemplary punishments, the Virginians did their best to impede the flow of slaves answering his call to arms. A lack of reinforcements and supplies, combined with the decimation of his forces by smallpox and the defeat at Great Bridge, served to limit the immediate military impact of Dunmore’s actions, until he was eventually driven out of the Chesapeake altogether in July 1776.¹¹⁸

However, in the wake of Dunmore’s proclamation, there were growing indications that the South might be on the brink of a major uprising. North Carolina was convulsed by rumours that Dunmore was planning an invasion, and that his

¹¹⁴ Lund Washington to George Washington, Mount Vernon, 3 December 1775; Washington to Reed, Cambridge, 15 December 1775, Chase, ed., *Papers of George Washington*, 2:479–80, 553 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁵ Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 250–70, 338–46; Blackburn, *Making*, 256–8; Parent, jr., *Foul Means*, 141–62.

¹¹⁶ Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: OUP, 1976), 52–6, 97–8; Linebaugh & Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 320–28.

¹¹⁷ Washington to Lee, Cambridge, 26 December 1775; Washington to Hancock, Cambridge, 18 December 1775, Chase, ed., *Papers of George Washington*, 2:611, 573.

¹¹⁸ McDonnell, *Politics of War*, 138, 148–58; Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 81–91; Quarles, ‘Lord Dunmore as Liberator’, 498–506.

agents were working to incite the slaves. The Committee of Inspection in Maryland's Dorchester County reported that 'the insolence of the Negroes... is come to such a height, that we are under a necessity of disarming them'; on one occasion, eighty guns along with other weapons were confiscated.¹¹⁹ In Charleston, growing numbers of runaway slaves found a haven on Sullivan's Island in the mouth of the harbour, commanded by the British warships to which Governor Campbell had retreated in September. It was widely believed that Campbell was 'harbouring & protecting... those Villains,' and probably also abetting their 'nightly Sallies[,]... robberies and depredations.' By the time a successful punitive expedition could be mounted in December, as many as 500 people were estimated to be on the island, many of whom were ultimately evacuated by the British.¹²⁰ The arrival of a Royal Navy flotilla at the mouth of the Savannah River in 1776 had similar effects on Georgia's black population. Several hundred slaves told Governor James Wright, by then himself a fugitive from Savannah's Council of Safety, that 'they were come for the King.' By March, Patriot officers had decided that 'it is far better for the public and the owners' for the 200 runaways gathered on Tybee Island to be killed if they could not be easily captured, in order to 'deter other negroes from deserting.'¹²¹

For the colonists, such incidents only served as further proof of a 'Settled plan' to instigate 'Tories & Negro Slaves to rise in our Bowels.'¹²² However, the course of events during the winter of 1775–6 indicates that a 'settled plan' was precisely what was lacking. British responses to slave unrest were generally hesitant and cautious, and there was certainly no attempt to emulate Dunmore, although several people suggested comparable measures in this period. Captain John Dalrymple recommended raising a force of indentured servants, convicts, and 'the bravest & most ingenious of the black Slaves' from Chesapeake ports in Virginia, Maryland and Delaware. Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell called for the recruitment of 1,400 'stout

¹¹⁹ Report of Committee of Inspection, Fall 1775, quoted in Wood, "'Dream Deferred'", 175; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 64.

¹²⁰ Olwell, "'Domestick Enemies'", 39–46; Campbell to Dartmouth, 19 September 1775, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 11:116–8; Council of Safety to Richard Richardson, Charles Town, 19 December 1775, Chesnutt et al., eds., *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 10:576.

¹²¹ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 65–6 ('Memorial of Sir James Wright and several other gentlemen', quoted at 66); Col. Stephen Bull to Henry Laurens, Savannah, 14 March 1776, quoted in Wood, "'Dream Deferred'", 179.

¹²² Henry Laurens to William Manning, Charles Town, 27 February 1776, Chesnutt et al., eds., *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 11:123.

Active Negroes' from the West Indies, whose deployment on the mainland would, he confidently predicted, trigger massive desertions from among the local slaves.¹²³

Clearly, ideas about undermining slavery, and even arming slaves, were being widely discussed in official circles. But the submission of such proposals by individual, and relatively junior officers, strongly indicates that the ministry had made no definitive policy decisions on the issue.

Widespread assumptions about the strength of Loyalism in the South probably mitigated against the sort of strategy of all-out social disruption adopted by Dunmore, who repeatedly pleaded in vain for reinforcements. With military efforts initially concentrated on the Northern colonies, the British largely missed whatever opportunity there might have been to exploit the widespread unrest that Dunmore's proclamation had triggered in the South. When an expedition against Charleston, under the command of Sir Henry Clinton, was finally mounted in June 1776, it came to grief against the guns of Fort Moultrie, newly-erected on the same Sullivan's Island where escaped slaves had been massing a few months earlier.¹²⁴

Shortly afterwards, plans for a serious insurrection in Jamaica's Hanover Parish were discovered. This elaborate and extensive conspiracy had been timed to coincide with the withdrawal of troops destined for North America from the island. The prominence of creole slaves in its leadership and organisation was noted with concern; they were widely assumed to have been inspired by the table talk of masters who had 'been too careless of Expressions' in commending the American rebels 'for Encountering Death in every form, rather than submit to Slavery let its Chains be ever so gilded.'¹²⁵ If nothing else, the Hanover Parish plot was a dramatic reminder of the risks involved in any attempt to interfere with slavery. It would be over two years before the British again sought to mobilise the disaffection of the enslaved.

¹²³ Dalrymple, 'Project for Strengthening General Howe's Operations in the North...', c. 1775; Campbell to Germain, 16 January 1776, both quoted in Morgan & O'Shaughnessy, 'Arming Slaves in the American Revolution', 189–90.

¹²⁴ Conway, 'Britain and the Revolutionary Crisis', 338–40; Clinton to Germain, 8 July 1776; Parker to Stephens, 9 July 1776, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 12:162–4, 167–71; Frances Reece Kepner, 'A British View of the Siege of Charleston, 1776', *JSH*, 11:1 (February 1945), 93–101; David K. Wilson, *The Southern Strategy: Britain's conquest of South Carolina and Georgia, 1775–1780* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 36–58.

¹²⁵ Richard B. Sheridan, 'The Jamaican Slave Insurrection Scare of 1776 and the American Revolution', *JNH*, 61:3 (July 1976), 290–308 (John Lindsay to William Robertson, 6 August 1776, quoted at 300–301); Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 172–9; O'Shaughnessy, *Empire Divided*, 151–4.

At the end of 1778, British forces led by Archibald Campbell invaded Georgia; until the end of the war, the South would be the main focus of British operations on the mainland. The American victory at Saratoga, and above all the intervention of France, soon followed by Spain, had widened the scope of the conflict, threatening a more general crisis of the British Atlantic empire. For London, defence of the West Indian colonies was now paramount, and it was not feasible to sustain offensive campaigns in New England whilst simultaneously transferring men to the Caribbean. In this situation, the South was prioritised as a potential source of food and other essential supplies for the West Indies. Furthermore, persistent confidence in Southern Loyalism raised hopes of raising extensive provincial forces, enabling Georgia and the Carolinas to be held with only a limited commitment of British regulars.¹²⁶

In the South, African-American initiatives quickly forced British commanders to confront the issue of slavery. Henry Laurens estimated that 5,000 Georgian slaves had run away by the time Savannah fell to Campbell's men in January 1779. Over the next two years, many more blacks flocked to the redcoated armies that occupied Georgia and South Carolina, and advanced as far north as Virginia.¹²⁷

The inconsistent and uncertain British response to this unprecedented exodus was shaped by diverse and often contradictory imperatives. Welcoming the slaves of rebels might undermine the American war effort, and intimidate Patriot slaveholders into neutrality; such people were also a potential source of much needed ancillary manpower. Thus, in June 1779, Clinton, by then commander-in-chief in North America, formally offered African Americans who 'desert[ed] the Rebel Standard... full security to follow within these lines any Occupation which [they] shall think proper.' He went so far as to 'strictly forbid any Person to sell or claim right over any Negroe, the property of a rebel, who may take refuge with any part of this Army.' If Clinton's proclamation did not explicitly refer to a change in legal status, the British army did raise the prospect of a route out of bondage for the thousands of Southern blacks who would act as pioneers, scouts, guides, and military labourers.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ John Shy, 'British Strategy for Pacifying the Southern Colonies, 1778–1781', in Crow & Tise, eds., *Southern Experience*, 155–66; Conway, 'Britain and the Revolutionary Crisis', 340–42.

¹²⁷ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 86–7, 118–9.

¹²⁸ Proclamation by Sir Henry Clinton, Philipsburg, 30 June 1779, quoted in Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 103.

As we have seen, Campbell was a longstanding enthusiast for the use of slaves as soldiers; Clinton himself expressed feelings of ‘tenderness & humanity’ for the Black Pioneers he had commanded in New York, who he was determined should ‘be intitled (as far as depends upon me) to their freedom’ at the end of the war. On occasion, usually in emergencies, the British armed slaves in the Southern campaign. Most notably, several hundred African Americans fought during the 1779 siege of Savannah, where their performance impressed participants from both sides.¹²⁹

However, the British generals never seriously contemplated the kind of war of liberation anticipated by slaves at the outset of the conflict. An indiscriminate appeal to all slaves risked alienating the white Loyalists whose active support formed a central plank of the Southern strategy. The very presence of the British army had caused massive economic disruption in the lower South, as slaves abandoned the plantations and Patriot planters fled their estates. The aim of re-establishing royal government in Georgia and South Carolina was hardly consistent with giving further encouragement to social upheavals that threatened the complete collapse of the plantation system. By 1780, the scale of slave desertions to the army in South Carolina led Clinton to issue orders for ‘such arrangements as will discourage their joining us.’ Not long afterwards, the military authorised the Charleston Board of Police to begin returning runaways to masters who had sworn the oath of allegiance to the crown. On at least one occasion, British troops efficiently crushed an incipient slave rebellion.¹³⁰

The thousands of African Americans who were taken by the army from abandoned or plundered estates were generally considered to be spoils of war whose title effectively devolved on the captors like any other booty. In theory, they might be sold, hired out, or put to work for the benefit of the military, or used to compensate Loyalists whose own property had been confiscated. In practice, many such people were undoubtedly sold for private gain or claimed as personal property, especially when they were seized by the irregular Loyalist units whose conduct in the latter stages of the war was often little removed from outright banditry. South Carolina

¹²⁹ Clinton to George Martin, 10 May 1776, quoted in Todd W. Braisted, ‘The Black Pioneers and others: the military role of Black Loyalists in the American War for Independence’, in John W. Pulis, ed., *Moving On: Black Loyalists in the Afro-Atlantic World* (New York: Garland, 1999), 11–12; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 96–8; Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 87–8, 108–9.

¹³⁰ Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves and Subjects: The culture of power in the South Carolina low country, 1740–1790* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 260–64; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 86–90, 112–21 (Clinton to Cornwallis, 20 May 1780, quoted at 119).

merchant John Cruden was appointed commissioner of sequestered estates, responsible for a hundred plantations and more than five thousand slaves 'sequestered' by the British. These estates were intended to produce provisions that would reduce the army's dependence on its long and precarious transatlantic supply line, whilst simultaneously generating profits that would go towards the support and compensation of white Loyalists. Cruden sought to maintain traditional plantation discipline, and the nominal wages due to the labourers were in practice absorbed by the 'unavoidable Charges, and great' incurred by Cruden for their maintenance.¹³¹

For the most part, then, the British army in the South offered the enslaved a precarious refuge, and only when doing so offered clear military advantages. Black aspirations to freedom were usually considered a force to be exploited, accommodated or contained as expediency demanded. The self-interested cynicism that all-too often pervaded British attitudes was most starkly illustrated by the fate of the slaves who took flight en masse to join Cornwallis's army on its final march through Virginia in 1781. In a vain effort to conserve food supplies, they were driven out of the besieged British position at Yorktown, to face re-enslavement, or death from disease or starvation.¹³²

However, the latter stages of the war also offered glimpses of the sort of more expansive possibilities that had seemed on the brink of realisation in 1775. Brigadier General Alexander Leslie took command of Charleston's embattled British garrison in November 1781, and began forming black military units soon afterwards. By April 1782, there were 700 black soldiers, including the much-feared Black Dragoons, described by the scientist and inventor Benjamin Thompson, then commanding a Loyalist cavalry regiment, as the 'Seapoy Troop.'¹³³

Dunmore, ordered back to America in anticipation of the successful subjugation of Virginia only to learn on his arrival at the end of 1781 of Cornwallis's surrender, found himself with time to spare that he devoted to devising fresh ideas for 'making the wealth and riches of the enemy the means of bringing them to obedience'.

¹³¹ John Cruden, *Report on the Management of the Estates Sequestered in South Carolina, by Order of Lord Cornwallis in 1780–1782*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (Brooklyn, 1890), 16; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 93–4, 122–6.

¹³² Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 118–127; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 141, 163–71..

¹³³ Thompson to Germain, 11 January 1782, in Historical Manuscripts Commission (hereafter HMC), *Report on the Manuscripts of Mrs. Stopford-Sackville*, 2 vols. (London, 1904–10), 2:250; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 136, n. 128, 138–9.

He claimed that ‘every one that I have conversed with think[s], and, I must own, my own sentiments perfectly coincide with theirs, that the most efficacious, expeditious, cheapest, and certain means... is in employing the blacks.’ Not only could slaves be employed ‘on much easier terms’, they were ‘perfectly attached to our sovereign’, and also ‘from my own knowledge of them... they are as disciplined as any set of raw men that I know of.’

In February 1782, he wrote to Clinton endorsing a proposal by Cruden to raise a new army of ten thousand slaves drawn from the sequestered estates for the reconquest of the South. Cruden had noted ‘the eagerness... in the generality of the people under my direction to have arms put in their hands on the incursions of the enemy’, and was confident ‘that they might be employed to the utmost advantage.’ He observed, in tones reminiscent of Dunmore’s Virginia strategy writ large, that ‘striking at the root of all property... must bring the most violent to their senses’.

Recognising the controversy such a measure would provoke, Cruden argued that ‘embodying the most hardy, intrepid, and determined blacks’ would make slave resistance less likely. He was at pains to stress that the soldiers would be ‘only changing one master for another; and let it be clearly understood that they are to serve the King for ever.’ Dunmore, however, insisted on the need for generous cash bounties on enlistment, ‘a promise of freedom to all that should serve during the continuance of the war’, and raised the possibility of blacks being gradually promoted to non-commissioned officers.¹³⁴

Whether this rather unlikely scheme could have altered the course of the war at this point is doubtful. But arming so many African Americans on such terms would surely have dealt a formidable blow to the plantation system in the lower South, already devastated by disease, massive losses of slave labour, and the impact of a war characterised by ‘a savage, fratricidal violence that tore the fabric of society.’¹³⁵

In any case, by 1782, after Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown, the British government and high command had already accepted defeat on the mainland. The

¹³⁴ Cruden to Dunmore, 5 January 1782; ‘Sketch of a plan for arming the Negroes’, 5 January 1782; Dunmore to Clinton, 2 February, 1782, all in George Livermore, *An Historical Research Respecting the Opinions of the Founders of the Republic on Negroes as Slaves, as Citizens, and as Soldiers* (3rd edn., Boston, 1862), 142–7.

¹³⁵ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 291. During the American Civil War, slavery was effectively destroyed in many of the border states exempted from the terms of the Emancipation Proclamation by the mass enlistment of slaves from those areas in the Union army. See Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), 64–5.

fleeting prospect of the 'empire for liberty' waging war against slavery had passed for the time being. But what remained very much in the balance was the fate of the thousands of African Americans for whom Britain had seemed to represent their best chance of realising the American Revolution's message of freedom.

Chapter Two

The Diaspora of Defeat

As the Revolutionary War gradually ground to an end on the mainland after Yorktown, Sir Guy Carleton, British commander-in-chief in North America from April 1782, was charged with superintending an unprecedented movement of people out of the territory of the United States. Somewhere between 60–100,000 Loyalists left the former thirteen colonies in a migratory web that spanned the full scope of the British Atlantic world.¹ For the white émigrés, the trauma of Britain’s defeat was followed by that of involuntary exile. For African Americans, the prospect of leaving behind the mainland slave regimes was bound up with uncertainties as to how far Britain would go in peacetime to honour the ambiguous commitments made by its commanders. This chapter traces the multiple routes by which several thousand of these people eventually came to the Bahamas. It first examines the very different experiences of émigrés from New York and the lower South. The latter included substantial numbers of slaveholders, keen to re-establish as much as possible of their old way of life, including the enslavement of the African Americans who travelled with them. Their initial efforts to do this, in East Florida, were largely frustrated, first by the chaos this sudden influx of people precipitated, then by the decision to return the colony to Spain in 1783. Attention then focused on the Bahamas, adjacent to Florida and newly-restored to British rule. The society that had developed there by 1783, in many respects profoundly different from the rest of English-speaking America, and especially from the plantation societies of the South and the Caribbean, is examined in the second section. The final section examines how Loyalists from East Florida, in spite of their initial ambivalence about the Bahamas, succeeded in

¹ For estimates of the overall scale of the Loyalist migration see Brown, *Good Americans*, 192, 227–228; Keith Mason, ‘The Loyalist Diaspora and the Reconfiguration of the British Atlantic World’, in Eliga H. Gould & Peter S. Onuf, eds., *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 240. On Loyalism generally see also Sabine, *Biographical Sketches*; Siebert, ‘Dispersion of the American Tories’, 185–97; Robert McCluer Calhoun, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760–1781* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973); Esmond Wright, ed., *Red, White and True Blue: The Loyalists in the American Revolution* (New York: AMS, 1976); Charlene Johnson Kozy, ‘Tories Transplanted: the Caribbean exile and plantation settlement of Southern Loyalists’, *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 75:1 (Spring 1991), 18–42; Prokopow, ‘“To the Torrid Zones”’; Maya Jasanoff, ‘The Other Side of Revolution: Loyalists in the British empire’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 65:2 (April 2008), 205–32.

subsuming a rather longer and more diverse sequence of migrations within a narrative of their own dynamic impact on the islands.

I: Exile and Emancipation: The Loyalist Diaspora in Black and White

For African Americans who had willingly or unwillingly thrown in their lot with the forces of the crown, the period leading up to the withdrawal of the British army from New York, Savannah, and Charleston was an anxious time, in which the heady prospect of making good their escape from slavery was juxtaposed with stark reminders of the vulnerability and uncertainty of their position. Years later, Boston King, an escaped slave from South Carolina, would recall how a rumour that ‘all the slaves... were to be delivered up to their masters’ had ‘filled us all with inexpressible anguish and terror, especially when we saw our old masters coming from Virginia, North-Carolina, and other parts, and seizing upon slaves in the streets of New-York, or even dragging them out of their beds.’²

With the war won, American slaveholders were determined to recover as many as possible of the thousands of slaves lost to flight and plunder. From George Washington downwards, authorities in the new republic insisted that the terms of the preliminary articles of peace of November 1782 prohibited the British from removing any blacks, who should be treated as fugitive slaves and returned forthwith to their original owners.³

Especially in view of the ambiguous language of the Philipsburg proclamation, the repudiation of any commitment to Britain’s erstwhile African-American allies would have been a tragic but unsurprising development. However, Carleton disavowed any notion that ‘the King’s minister could deliberately stipulate in a treaty an engagement to be guilty of a notorious breach of the public faith towards people of any complexion.’ With London’s support, he defiantly insisted that in ‘the case of Negroes who had been declared free previous to my arrival... I had no right to deprive them of that liberty I found them possessed of.’⁴ Carleton’s stance was undoubtedly shaped by a personal and military sense of decency and probity, but it also illustrated how sections of British public and official opinion regarding slavery had developed in the course of the American Revolution. A document discussing the evacuation of blacks from North America asserted that simply by virtue of reaching the British

² ‘Memoirs of the life of Boston King, a Black Preacher’, *The Methodist Magazine for the Year 1798* (London, 1798), 157.

³ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 192–3; see also Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 137, 139–49.

⁴ Carleton to Washington, New York, 12 May 1783, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 21:166, 165.

army, escaped American slaves had become free, ‘the British Constitution not allowing of slavery but holding out freedom and protection to all who came within.’⁵ By insisting to Washington that ‘*prior Engagements binding the National Honour... must be kept with all colours*’, Carleton reasserted Britain’s tarnished claim to be the true home of ‘liberty on English principles.’⁶

In New York, the evacuations, conducted under Carleton’s supervision, were meticulously recorded in a document known as the ‘Book of Negroes’, with claims to freedom assessed by a Board of Inquiry that admitted black testimony. During 1783, approximately three thousand ‘black Loyalists’ were transported from New York after being issued with certificates of freedom, or ‘free passes’.⁷ Most of these people initially took up the offer of land in Nova Scotia, but over the following decades their dogged efforts to realise and maintain their hard-won freedom would generate a diaspora stretching across the Atlantic to London and West Africa and even to the Pacific.⁸

Between August and October 1783, around 1,000–1,500 Loyalists left New York to establish settlements on the Bahamian island of Abaco.⁹ The ‘Book of Negroes’ lists 95 African Americans who travelled in August on the first two transports, the *Nautilus* and the *William*. All of these people were described as being either ‘born free’ or ‘formerly the property of’ named individuals. However, they were

⁵ ‘Précis relative to Negroes in America’, c. 1783, CO5/8/112–4, quoted in Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 150–51. Schama tentatively attributes this document to Carleton himself. However, it may conceivably have been the work of Carleton’s secretary during 1782–3, Maurice Morgann, the author of the emancipation scheme discussed at pp. 48–9 above. Morgann’s administrative role in the British evacuations of New York, and the possible influence of his antislavery convictions upon Carleton, have thus far escaped scholarly attention.

⁶ Carleton quoted in Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 146 (emphasis in original).

⁷ Copies of the record of the New York émigrés, known as the ‘Inspection Roll of Negroes’ or ‘the Book of Negroes’, exist in a number of British and American archives, and much of the document is now widely available online. It has also been published as Graham Russell Hodges, ed., *The Black Loyalist Directory: African Americans in exile after the American Revolution* (New York: Garland, 1996).

⁸ On the ‘Black Loyalist diaspora’, see Ellen Gibson Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York: Putnam, 1976); James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: the search for a promised land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone 1783–1870* (London: Longman, 1967); Hodges, ed., *Black Loyalist Directory*; Pulis, ed., *Moving On*; Mary Beth Norton, ‘The Fate of some Black Loyalists of the American Revolution’, *JNH*, 58:4 (October 1973), 402–26; Schama, *Rough Crossings*; Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway slaves of the American Revolution and their global quest for liberty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

⁹ Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 135–47, 248, n.31; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:182–5.

recorded against the ‘names of persons in whose possession they are now’.¹⁰ In a subsequent return of Loyalists who embarked for Abaco, the 403 blacks are described simply as ‘servants’. As we shall see, this system of indentured apprenticeship could all-too easily be translated into a form of bonded labour amounting to effective or even literal re-enslavement.¹¹

Far more African Americans left the United States in British transports from Savannah and Charleston between July and December 1782, including the great majority of those who would eventually come to the Bahamas.¹² These people, far from Carleton’s personal scrutiny, in the heart of what remained defiantly slave societies, faced a far more precarious situation than that of the New York émigrés. The evacuations from the lower South were inevitably conducted in the context of ‘a bitter contest for possession of the bondmen in British lines: between patriots and loyalists, loyalists and the military, the banditti and the privateers.’ American slaveholders and state authorities, anxious to secure the restoration of the thousands of slaves they had lost to flight and seizure during the war, vociferously demanded the right to inspect shipping prior to departure. Many Loyalists expected to receive compensation for property confiscated by the Patriots in the shape of blacks held by the army, whose officers pursued their own lucrative illicit traffic in slaves in the months leading up to the final evacuations.¹³

In South Carolina, an exasperated General Leslie, struggling to balance these conflicting interests in a manner consistent with Carleton’s ‘humane commands’, negotiated an accord with state Governor John Matthews that American-owned slaves ‘now in my Power, shall be left here, and restored to their former Owners,... except such Slaves as may have rendered themselves particularly obnoxious by their

¹⁰ ‘Book of Negroes’, British Headquarters Papers #10427, f. 83, in Riley, *Homeward Bound*, Appendix D, 266–9.

¹¹ Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 144–6; see also pp. 118–20 below.

¹² Quantifying the number of émigrés from Georgia and South Carolina is rendered problematic by the chaotic and fractured nature of both the evacuations themselves, and the limited documentary record of them. Sylvia Frey suggests figures of 3,500–6,000 slaves removed from Georgia, and approximately 10,000 from South Carolina. Cassandra Pybus argues that 3,500 and 8,000 African Americans left Georgia and South Carolina respectively, with an estimated 1,200 of the latter being free. See Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 174, 177–9; Cassandra Pybus, ‘Jefferson’s Faulty Math: The question of slave defections in the American Revolution’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 62:2 (April 2005), 262–3 & nn. 34–35.

¹³ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 173; Leslie to Carleton, 10 August 1782, *Calendar of the Emmet Collection of Manuscripts Relating to American History* (New York: New York Public Library, 1959), 498–9.

Attachment and Services to the *British* Troops, and such as have had specifick Promises of Freedom.’¹⁴ The precise grounds on which African Americans were to be deemed ‘obnoxious’, however, remained open to very divergent constructions, and this fragile agreement rapidly broke down.¹⁵

Furthermore, the ultimate legal status of ‘obnoxious’ blacks was not resolved, but deferred pending an ‘immediate Application... to the Commander in Chief for his Directions concerning them.’¹⁶ The extent, if any, of British obligations to the sequestered slaves was especially problematic, and never fully clarified.¹⁷ Although some free passes were issued to blacks in the South, there was apparently no systematic registration of the status of African Americans leaving Charleston and Savannah of the kind compiled in New York.¹⁸ In the absence of such documentation, hundreds, and possibly thousands of black émigrés found themselves in an ambiguous position, in which entitlement to freedom remained a possibility, alongside the prospect of effective or actual re-enslavement by white Loyalists determined to replace the land, slaves and other property they had lost during the war.

The initial destination for the bulk of Southern Loyalist émigrés was East Florida, the last remaining British mainland colony outside Canada. Ceded to Britain by Spain in 1763, East Florida had remained an underdeveloped and thinly settled colony prior to the American Revolution, inhabited by no more than 3,000 people, of whom around two-thirds were black, concentrated around the town of St. Augustine, and the St. Marys River area on the border with Georgia. Slaves and indentured servants produced rice, indigo, corn and naval stores. In the course of the war, several thousand Loyalist refugees and fugitives of various kinds from Georgia and the Carolinas had entered the colony, although relatively few permanently settled there. In

¹⁴ Leslie to Carleton [‘(Private)’], 18 November 1782, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 21:140; ‘Articles of a Treaty, Respecting Slaves within the British Lines, British Debts, Property secured by Family Settlements, &c.’, Cedar Grove, South Carolina, 10 October 1782, Peter Force Papers, LC, series 8A, #9 (emphasis in original).

¹⁵ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 176–8.

¹⁶ ‘Articles of a Treaty, Respecting Slaves within the British Lines, British Debts, Property secured by Family Settlements, &c.’, Cedar Grove, South Carolina, 10 October 1782, Force Papers, LC, series 8A, #9.

¹⁷ Leslie to Carleton, 10 August 1782, 18 October 1782, *Calendar of the Emmet Collection*, 498–9, 501; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 174–6.

¹⁸ For references to such passes see the record of the ‘Tryal of Jenny, a Negro Wench’, New Providence, 15 June 1786, RGD, Registry Office Book M, f. 340; Wilson, *Loyal Blacks*, 42.

1782 Governor Patrick Tonyn estimated the population at 4,000 prior to the arrival of the evacuees from Savannah.¹⁹

By April 1783, somewhere between 7,500 and 13,000 émigrés from Georgia and South Carolina had come to East Florida.²⁰ An analysis of one listing of 7,579 of these refugees indicates a broad cross-section of the societies they had left behind. Predictably, those Loyalists who can be traced to backcountry areas owned fewer than average slaves. Of 1,347 white households, slightly more than two-thirds possessed no slaves at all, while just 12 men accounted for over 35 percent of all the slaves enumerated. Strikingly, just 44 free African Americans were recorded among the 4,519 blacks listed.²¹

A number of black Loyalists, especially soldiers, certainly left the United States and enslavement, independently of the main evacuations. One group who eventually received land in Nova Scotia probably travelled to East Florida as part of the provincial corps units that initially formed the new garrison of the colony. Some were recruited from South Carolina for military service in the West Indies, forming the basis of what would eventually become the West India Regiments. Others became maroons operating on the periphery of the plantation zone. As late as 1787, a hundred-strong maroon band, still styling themselves ‘the King of England’s Soldiers’, were

¹⁹ J. Leitch Wright, jr., ‘Blacks in British East Florida’, *FHQ*, 54:4 (April 1976), 427–30; Carole Watterson Troxler, ‘Refuge, Resistance, and Reward: The Southern Loyalists’ Claim on East Florida’, *JSH*, 55:4 (November 1989), 565–79; Siebert, ed., *Loyalists in East Florida*, 1:115. Somewhat higher estimates of the colony’s population before the summer of 1782 are presented in ‘Observations on East Florida’, enclosure in Bernardo del Campo to Conde de Floridablanca, 8 June 1783, in Joseph Byrne Lockety, *East Florida 1783–1785: a file of documents assembled, and many of them translated*, ed. John Watson Laughley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 120–21.

²⁰ Inspector of refugees John Winniet compiled three returns between July 1782 and April 1783, and counted 5,090 white and 8,285 black émigrés. Household lists of evacuees from Savannah and Charleston, apparently compiled en route to East Florida, total just 3,060 whites and 4,519 blacks. The latter figures probably exclude several hundred provincial corps troops who also went to St. Augustine, and the uncertain number of other refugees who arrived overland or via private transport. See Siebert, ed., *Loyalists in East Florida*, 1:130; ‘Returns of Refugees who came to East Florida in consequence of the evacuations of Georgia and Carolina’, CO5/560/403–10. According to Governor Tonyn and garrison commander General Archibald McArthur there were 16,000 people in the colony by the autumn of 1783; see Tonyn to Carleton, St. Augustine, 11 September 1783, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 21:216–7; McArthur to Carleton, St. Augustine, 23 May 1783, HMC, *Report on American Manuscripts in the Royal Institution of Great Britain*, 4 vols. (London, 1904–9), 4:97.

²¹ Troxler, ‘Refuge, Resistance, and Reward’, 581–5; the total of 44 free blacks includes six people of colour who were listed as whites.

raiding plantations in Georgia and South Carolina from a fortified camp in the swamps around the lower Savannah River.²²

However, although many of them were surely among the people evacuated to East Florida, the sequestered slaves and other ‘obnoxious’ blacks remain largely unaccounted for. It seems likely that most were effectively in the possession of white Loyalist slaveholders, both during the migration and afterwards, but after the evacuation of Charleston, references to these two categories of African Americans, whose status had caused the British authorities such vexation, abruptly cease. Nevertheless, the brief history of Loyalist East Florida affords fleeting glimpses of a colony in which the fallout of the American Revolution had resulted in a marked blurring of the line between slavery and freedom.

The aftermath of war, and the sudden influx of homeless and often destitute people caused massive disruption in East Florida. Lawlessness and banditry were endemic, and with the arrival of the news that Britain had provisionally agreed to return the colony to Spain, the situation descended towards chaos.²³ In May 1783, one resident reported that ‘the whole of the People in the Province are in the utmost Confusion, nothing going on but robbing and plundering’. By September, following the removal of the regular garrison, Governor Tonyn admitted that ‘Government in its feeble disabled condition’ had all but lost control, with the inhabitants in a state of ‘the utmost consternation.’ Since the end of the war, the colony had been subjected to the ‘depredations’ of ‘rapacious, lawless and abandoned men, collected in the back country between this and Georgia’. Previously ‘checked only by awe of the Troops’, these banditti were now likely to ‘be joined in a general ravage by the lower sort of people of no property ever ready to take advantage of confusion and riot.’ The result would be that ‘the settlements will be exposed, and the Negroes plundered, from incentive motives of poverty, and the facility of conveying them to the back countries out of reach of all governments’. Tonyn also worried that the response of Florida’s

²² Carole Watterson Troxler, ‘Hidden from History: Black Loyalists at Country Harbour, Nova Scotia’, in Pulis, ed., *Moving On*, 39–40, 45, 48; O’Shaughnessy, *Empire Divided*, 178, 180–81; Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 4, 6; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 139, 190–91, 226–7; quotation from Michael Mullin, ‘British Caribbean and North American Slaves in an Era of War and Revolution’, in Crow & Tise, eds., *Southern Experience*, 241.

²³ ‘Preliminary Articles of Peace between Spain and England’, 20 January 1783, Lockey, *East Florida*, 54–6; For London’s initial instructions regarding the cession of East Florida see Townshend to Tonyn, London, 28 February 1783, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 21. Tonyn gave official notice to the colonists in a proclamation of 29 April, but rumours had apparently been circulating for much longer: see Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 150, 125–6.

Creek and Chickasaw Indians to the British withdrawal ‘may be very alarming and dreaded’; one chief was reported to have sworn ‘Vengeance against the King that gave away their Country.’²⁴

During the final months of British occupation, some Loyalists professed themselves ready to ‘die with our Swords in our hands, for we are almost driven to despair’. The provincial corps troops were on the brink of mutiny, with some declaring that ‘they will rather die than be Carried to Hallifax to be discharged’. Some of them were said to have formed a plan ‘to burn the barracks, plunder the Town & take Possession of the Fort, to arm all the Negroes & to put every white Man to Death that opposed them keeping the Country to themselves.’²⁵

Amidst this state of general disorder, there was little scope for Loyalists to establish a stable and secure regime for the management and exploitation of enslaved labour. The uncertainty of land tenures discouraged large scale commercial planting, and slaves were frequently hired out, or employed solely in subsistence cultivation. Many ran away, or were seized by the banditti.²⁶

In addition, the colony was inundated with what Tonym called ‘a considerable influx of transient people from Georgia and Carolina, to recover their property in Negroes.’ In view of the ‘cruel and unrelenting severity with which they have treated the Loyalists who have gone into these states’, Tonym considered himself justified in ‘retaining Negroes they claim’.²⁷ Another writer stated more explicitly that the Americans were ‘taking the Negroes that have been plundered from them during the War’, and went on to observe that ‘this has hurt many of them that were never legally condemned.’ Criticising Tonym’s unwillingness to cooperate with the Americans, South Carolina Loyalist Dr. James Clitherall noted that the governor had ‘refused to

²⁴ ‘Extract of a Letter received by Captain Bissett in London from his Correspondent in St. Augustine’, 20 May 1783, enclosure in Nixon to Nepean, 22 October 1783, CO5/560/423; Tonym to Digby, St. Augustine, 10 September 1783, Locky, *East Florida*, 152–3; Tonym to Carleton, St. Augustine, 11 September 1783, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 21:216.

²⁵ ‘The Memorial of the British American Loyalists still in East Florida’, St. Mary’s River, 28 October 1784, CO23/26/89–90; ‘Letter received by Captain Bissett’, 20 May 1783, CO5/560/423–4; see also Locky, *East Florida*, 111, 230–31, 288–90; Carole Watterson Troxler, ‘Loyalist Refugees and the British Evacuation of East Florida, 1783–1785’, *FHQ*, 60:1 (July 1981), 9.

²⁶ Troxler, ‘Refuge, Resistance, and Reward’, 587–8; Siebert, ed., *Loyalists in East Florida*, 2:10–19.

²⁷ Tonym to Townshend, 15 May 1783, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 21:168.

surrender even those negroes who were without owners and had not been condemned by the court of admiralty.’²⁸

Almost the first action of the new Spanish governor of East Florida, Vicente Manuel de Zéspedes, following his arrival in July 1784, was to seek ‘a prompt and efficacious remedy’ for the problems arising from the confused and almost lawless situation of the colony’s black population. The proclamation that Zéspedes issued on 26 July was principally concerned with ‘the repeated stealing of negro and mulatto slaves in this province, their escape from their legitimate owners, and their concealment and protection by evilly disposed persons.’ However, it also required ‘every vagrant Negro without a known owner or else a document that attests his freedom’ to register for a work permit. This provision acknowledged the presence in East Florida of a stratum of blacks who were unable to prove themselves free, but who in practice were not enslaved.²⁹ At least 251 such people are known to have been issued permits to work in East Florida, most of them supposedly ‘fugitives from English-speaking masters.’³⁰

Furthermore, Zéspedes appears to have suspected that many black people in East Florida were held as slaves by Loyalists who possessed only the scantiest proof of legal entitlement to them. His proclamation allowed twenty days for ‘every person... who has in his power any Negro or Negroes, free mulatto, mulattoes, fugitive slaves, or slaves without known owners, to declare them’ to the Spanish authorities. That this measure was primarily directed at those Loyalists still to leave the colony is indicated by the further warning that no slave was to be shipped out of the colony without a written permit from the governor, on pain of their forfeiture to the Spanish crown.³¹

The Loyalist response to Zéspedes’ proclamation is itself revealing. Charleston printer John Wells, by then in Nassau, published an entirely untrue report in his

²⁸ ‘Letter received by Captain Bisset’, 20 May 1783, CO5/560/424; Siebert, ed., *Loyalists in East Florida*, 1:123–4 (the quotation is Siebert’s paraphrase of Clitherall).

²⁹ Proclamation of Governor Zéspedes, St Augustine, 26 July 1784, Lockey, *East Florida*, 240–41. The text quoted above is Lockey’s translation of the Spanish original; a contemporary English version appears in *Bahama Gazette*, 28 August 1784. See also Helen Hornbeck Tanner, *Zéspedes in East Florida, 1784–1790* (Miami, 1963; repr. Jacksonville: University of North Florida Press, 1989), 24–53.

³⁰ Jane Landers, ‘Black Society in Spanish St. Augustine, 1784–1821’ (PhD dissertation, University of Florida, 1988), 56, 69–70. At least two black émigrés in the Bahamas had been issued with a ‘Spanish Pass’; see RGD, Registry Office Book M, ff. 136, 147.

³¹ Proclamation of Zéspedes, 26 July 1784, Lockey, *East Florida*, 240–41.

Bahama Gazette that the blacks who had registered to receive work permits had been summarily shipped to Havana.³² East Florida Chief Justice James Hume expressed his concern that the proclamation ‘would operate against those negroes who had joined the British standard by invitation of generals, or commanders, and had thus become Free, though many of them could produce no certificate of manumission.’³³ The sincerity of Hume’s concern for the plight of these people was somewhat called into question when he went on to acknowledge ‘that five out of every six slaves in the province were held without title deeds, that purchasers of negroes were never given bills of sale, and that masters could show nothing better than parole sales and possession.’³⁴

Attempting to reconstruct a coherent overall picture of the situation of émigré blacks in Loyalist East Florida from this tantalisingly fragmented evidence is inevitably a somewhat fraught undertaking. Many years ago, Joseph Lockey suggested that effectively East Florida at this time contained ‘four classes of Negroes’, consisting of ‘those absolutely free, those deserving their freedom under British proclamation, those belonging to British subjects known to be their owners, and those strolling about without known masters.’³⁵ Of course, this is, already a long way from both the straightforward equation of blackness and slavery that was supposedly the norm in British America, and the three-tiered caste structure of whites, other free people, and slaves, that proved more common in practice.³⁶

But if anything, East Florida seems to have presented a still more complex state of affairs than Lockey’s schema acknowledged. The legal position of African Americans who had been seized from American owners was notably ambiguous. By the terms agreed by Carleton and Leslie, such people should only have been evacuated, and hence should only have been in Florida at all, if they had been deemed ‘obnoxious’.

³² *Bahama Gazette*, 20 November 1784. The erroneousness of this story was admitted in *Bahama Gazette*, 5 February 1785.

³³ Hume, 29 July 1784, quoted in Siebert, ed., *Loyalists in East Florida*, 1:162–3.

³⁴ Siebert, ed., *Loyalists in East Florida*, 1:163.

³⁵ Lockey, *East Florida*, 23.

³⁶ Gad Heuman, ‘Social Structure of the Slave Societies in the Caribbean’, in Franklin W. Knight, ed., *General History of the Caribbean*, III: *The slave societies of the Caribbean* (London: UNESCO/Macmillan, 1997), 138–68.

Although Carleton had never provided clear instructions regarding the ‘obnoxious’ and sequestered slaves from Georgia and South Carolina, African Americans in East Florida ‘without known masters’ were now effectively free, and might reasonably presume that the British government, in removing them from the jurisdiction of the United States, had acknowledged their entitlement to freedom.

However, there were also American blacks who found themselves in the possession of Loyalists who were *not* known to be their owners, and even those held by people who, as Clitherall’s remarks indicate, were known *not* to be their owners. If the British authorities would not return slaves to American owners, they were left with the thorny question of whether or not there was any legitimate basis for continuing to treat such people as slaves at all. Conversely, if it *was* acceptable for African Americans to be treated as the property of Loyalists who could offer no better justification than possession, there was little to prevent slaveholders from also making themselves the masters of black people who had come to East Florida without masters, regardless of their de facto freedom.

In the absence of detailed records, Hume’s claim that proof of legitimate ownership could be provided for only one in six slaves in East Florida is largely beyond verification. It is still less possible to know how the status of the remainder broke down into the categories discussed above. But it does seem both plausible and likely that for a significant number of African Americans, the years of war, revolution and displacement had undermined the basis of their enslavement, both as a legal fact and a lived reality.

Ultimately, the fate of these people would depend on the capacity of the interested parties to contest the reality on the ground in their favour. Inevitably, this would be a one-sided contest, in view of the Atlantic world’s asymmetric distribution of power along lines of race and class. But the outcome remained very much in the balance in the summer of 1783, as the residents of East Florida learned that they were to be uprooted once again, and contemplated the prospect of seeking ‘refuge on barren Islands’ that were ‘only at best a fit Asylum for Pirates and Wreckers and those fond of a marine Way of living’.³⁷

³⁷ John Cruden, *An Address to the Loyal Part of the British Empire, and the Friends of Monarchy Throughout the Globe* (London, 1785), 4; Oswell Eve to Daniel Cox, Cat Island, 29 May 1784, CO23/26/204.

II: ‘This hitherto obscure Colony’: the pre-Loyalist Bahamas

The Bahamas were one of the oldest British settlements in the Americas; the first English colonists, the Eleutherian Adventurers of Bermuda, arrived in 1648, prior to both the conquest of Jamaica and the founding of Carolina. Nonetheless, by the 1780s the archipelago remained a ‘marginal non-plantation colony’, thinly populated and underdeveloped.³⁸ For much of the eighteenth century, the Bahamas had largely ‘escaped the attention of the British Government’, but from 1783 onwards, an assortment of visitors arrived, in part to investigate the colony’s potential as a home for Loyalist émigrés from Florida and elsewhere. Their observations, especially the account of the German Johann David Schoepf, who toured North America in the winter of 1783–4 after serving as a surgeon to the British army, furnish an unusually vivid impression of ‘these Islands, so long neglected by the European powers, and unexplored even by the English settlers and their descendants’, on the eve of the Loyalist influx.³⁹

The Bahamas had last drawn such attention from the wider world as one of the foremost bases for Atlantic piracy. In the first decades of the eighteenth century, amidst the complete breakdown of metropolitan control, up to 1,000 pirates used the Bahamas as a ‘General Rendezvous & seem to look upon those Islands as their own.’⁴⁰ Scorning ‘all those who will submit to be governed by laws which rich men have made [to]... rob the Poor under the Cover of Law,’ the pirates championed a lifestyle of ‘Plenty and Satiety, Pleasure and Ease, Liberty and Power.’ The impact of their depredations on the maritime commercial arteries of Atlantic capitalism, including the burgeoning Atlantic slave trade, prompted a ferocious response from the

³⁸ B. W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean 1807–1834* (1984; new edn., Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 1995), 43. On the Eleutherian Adventurers see Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:74–91.

³⁹ Wylly, *Short Account*, 5, 1; Johann David Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation 1783–84*, tr. & ed. Alfred J. Morrison, 2 vols. (1911; repr. New York: Burt Franklin, 1968).

⁴⁰ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:104–14; Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant seamen, pirates, and the Anglo-American maritime world, 1700–1750* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), 256–7, 267–8; Alexander Spotswood to Council of Trade and Plantations, 31 May 1717, quoted in Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic pirates in the golden age* (London: Verso, 2004), 30.

imperial powers.⁴¹ The restoration of royal authority in the Bahamas by Governor Woodes Rogers, facilitated by the deployment of four naval vessels and a hundred soldiers, was marked by the execution of eight pirates in December 1718.⁴²

Subsequently, the colony was subject to ‘some sort of Government, but by no means a regular or respectable one’. In the 1780s, Loyalist émigrés would refer to Bahamians as ‘the Offspring and Successors of the famous Black Beard the Pirate, who reigned here without Countroul long before his Majesty’, and it does seem that ‘elements of the piratical ethos remained embedded in the Bahamian consciousness’.⁴³ None of Rogers’ successors were forcibly deposed by armed mobs, as his predecessors Elias Haskett and Charles Chillingworth had been, but many of them struggled to cope with ‘so lawless, profligate and turbulent a people’.⁴⁴ The colonial state machine remained in a rudimentary condition in 1784, when the only public buildings in Nassau were ‘a church, a gaol, and an Assembly-house’ which doubled as the courthouse; the gubernatorial residence was a rented private house.⁴⁵

At this point, the Bahamas contained around 4,000 people, 60 percent of them on the island of New Providence. Most of the remainder lived in the long-established settlements on Eleuthera and the adjacent Harbour Island, with a handful of relatively recent settlers on some of the other Out Islands.⁴⁶

Nassau, the capital on New Providence, was described by Schoepf as a ‘little town’, populated by ‘a few royal officials, divers merchants, shipbuilders and carpenters, skippers, pilots, fishermen, and what laborers are needed’. The wooden houses were ‘lightly built and of simple construction’, with few glazed windows. Even the ‘one tolerably regular street’ was unpaved, and Samuel Kelly, another visitor in

⁴¹ Daniel Defoe, *A General History of the Pyrates*, ed. Manuel Schonhorn (London, 1724; repr. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), quoted in Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 14; see also Rediker, *Villains of All Nations*, 31–5; Linebaugh & Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 143–73.

⁴² Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:115–17; Rediker, *Villains of All Nations*, 11.

⁴³ Wylly, *Short Account*, 5; ‘Extract of a Letter from an American Loyalist, now settled as New Providence’, n.d. [after 18 May 1784], CO23/26/162; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:113.

⁴⁴ John Oldmixon, *The British Empire in America...*, 2 vols. (London, 1708), 350, 359; Governor Richard Fitzwilliam, 1730, quoted in Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:137.

⁴⁵ Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:263.

⁴⁶ ‘Bahama Islands’ [1785], Liverpool Papers, Add. MSS 38346, f. 56; cf. ‘Report of the Committee appointed to take into consideration the state of the Bahama Islands’, 28 April 1789, CO23/29/173. The population in 1773 is said to have comprised 2,052 whites and 2,241 ‘blacks’ in Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia, 1806 edn.), 2:199–200.

1784, related how his ‘heels were often bruised and the feet injured on sharp rocks and small stones through the streets of Nassau’. Licit commerce was confined to the ‘Bourse’, a building on the waterfront where people came ‘throughout the day’ both to transact business and ‘to hear or retail the news’.⁴⁷

Few travellers of the early 1780s visited Harbour Island and Eleuthera, and they were largely ignored by the émigrés in favour of emptier (and often warmer) Out Islands. As late as 1790, it was reported that the inhabitants were ‘all Natives born in the two Islands’, and one Loyalist claimed that of 58 families on Harbour Island ‘only five different surnames are found’. The islanders were said to be ‘so poor that they are not able to pay’ the usual fees for ‘Marrying, Burying, & Baptizing’. Their clothes were simple and light, seldom consisting of ‘more than a frock Shirt, and Trousers’ and hats made of palm leaves. Shoes were generally worn only on Sundays. The Harbour Islanders had built a small church, although in 1786 it remained ‘without a pew or Seat of any kind’; Eleuthera had no church, and its 800 or so residents, mostly unable to read, possessed ‘but little knowledge of Religion’. Despite their poverty, the people of these islands were reputed to ‘hardly know what Sickness is’, and to be ‘remarkable for their longevity’.⁴⁸

A 1785 report on the state of the Bahamas noted that ‘Planting was never hitherto an object of attention’, a view that outsiders had been echoing, and generally bemoaning, for much of the preceding century.⁴⁹ Most observers had little doubt that the principal cause of the paucity of agricultural development in the colony was the Bahamians themselves, ‘an indolent set of Men, who never made it a first Object, or properly attended to it.’ Peter Henry Bruce, an engineer of Scottish and Prussian extraction employed in Nassau in the 1740s, observed that ‘it is their own fault if the inhabitants want any of the necessaries of life’, since ‘they neither sow nor plant more

⁴⁷ Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:262–3; Samuel Kelly, *An Eighteenth-Century Seaman whose days have been few and evil*, ed. Crosbie Garstin (London: Jonathan Cape, 1925), 110.

⁴⁸ Thomas Robertson to Bishop Porteus, Harbour Island, 17 June 1790, Fulham Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, American Colonial Section, vol. XV, ff 80–81; Wylly, *Short Account*, 7, 4; ‘Account of the principal islands’, c. February 1784, Liverpool Papers, Add. MSS 38375, f. 124 (for the provenance of this document see Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 156–7, 248, n. 23); Oswell Eve to Daniel Cox, Cat Island, 29 May 1784, CO23/26/204.

⁴⁹ ‘Bahama Islands’ [1785], Liverpool Papers, Add. MSS 38346, f. 56; cf. Mark Catesby, *A Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*, 2 vols. (London, 1754 edn.), 2:xxxviii; Campbell, *Political Survey*, 2:658–9; ‘An American’, *American Husbandry. Containing an Account of the Soil, Climate, Production and Agriculture, of the British Colonies in North-America and the West Indies*, 2 vols. (London, 1775), 2:201–2.

than is necessary for maintaining their own families.’ Likewise, lieutenant John Wilson reported in 1784 that ‘the Bahamas have hitherto remained in an uncultivated state owing to the indolence of the inhabitants who pay no attention to the improvement of their land’.⁵⁰

Woodes Rogers had complained in 1719 that Bahamians seemingly preferred to ‘live poorly and indolently with a seeming contentment’, since ‘for work they mortally hate it’. Little had changed by 1784, when Schoepf observed that ‘of severe work they know nothing and do not want to know anything.’ But he too believed that ‘their poverty does not keep them from being heartily content’, since they preferred to ‘drink up their gains and dance away the time’; Kelly remarked with more distaste that ‘the inhabitants of Nassau were dissipated in the extreme...from night revels’.⁵¹

Bahamians’ willingness to ‘content themselves with whatever is produced by nature without being at any trouble to assist it’ owed something to the apparent natural abundance of the islands. Despite being thin and ‘everywhere rocky and stony’, the Bahamian soil’s surprising fertility was often commented on.⁵² Schoepf found that ‘in the wild state every spot is over-grown’, and a wide range of exotic fruits and plants, such as oranges, lemons, pineapples, bananas, figs, cocoa, grapes, and coffee beans ‘of the best taste’, were said to ‘grow in these islands with very little trouble.’ The islanders supplemented their diet with an assortment of local wildlife, including birds, feral pigs, turtles, and iguanas up to three feet in length, in addition to fish and crab. Woods such as mahogany and lignum vitae grew extensively, and the salt ponds on

⁵⁰ Eve to Cox, Cat Island, 29 May 1784, CO23/26/204; Peter Henry Bruce, *Memoirs of Peter Henry Bruce, Esq. A military officer in the services of Prussia, Russia, and Great Britain* (London, 1782), 425; John Wilson, ‘Report on the Bahama Islands’, 1784, quoted in Stark, *History and Guide*, 172. Wilson visited the Bahamas in 1783 and 1784 in obedience to Carleton’s orders to ‘make enquiry into the general state of those islands’; see Carleton to McArthur, 29 July 1783; McArthur to Carleton, 12 September 1783, HMC, *Report on American Manuscripts*, 4:247, 351; Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 136, 142, 156–9.

⁵¹ Rogers to Council of Trade and Plantations, 29 May 1719, Cecil Headlam, ed., *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series. America and West Indies*, XXXI (London, 1931), 101; Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:300–301; Kelly, *Eighteenth-Century Seaman*, 115.

⁵² Wilson, ‘Report on the Bahama Islands’, 1784, quoted in Stark, *History and Guide*, 172; Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:267; cf. ‘Bahama Islands’ [1785], Liverpool Papers, Add. MSS 38346, f. 56; Wylly, *Short Account*, 2–3.

Turks and other Out Islands offered another valuable and readily marketable commodity.⁵³

The longstanding inclination towards ‘a marine way of living’ in the Bahamas stemmed from the practicalities of exploiting these resources as well as longstanding cultural tradition. Bahamian ships ventured to the more remote Out Islands in search of the most abundant stocks of timber, game, fish, and salt, before carrying these articles both to New Providence and ports in America and the West Indies. Wrecking was another perennial pursuit of many Bahamian mariners. Recovering cargo from the many vessels that fell foul of the islands’ intricate and hazardous navigation offered the prospect of lucrative windfall gains. Although wreckers had thereby also ‘save[d] the lives of many people’, rumours of their unscrupulousness over the fate of stranded crews had always abounded; wrecking was also often said to be a thinly-veiled pretext for the sale of smuggled goods.⁵⁴

Extensive viceregal powers over the Bahamas had been granted in 1670 to six of the Lords Proprietors of Carolina. Although the Proprietors’ interest in the colony quickly waned, in the 1780s their heirs remained the formal owners of most Bahamian land. In practice, this had given rise to extensive customary commoning rights, whereby, for instance, ‘every man can fell wood as it pleases him and wherever he finds it’. This state of affairs was also another impediment to sustained and intensive cultivation, since the majority of islanders who could claim ‘no other Title to their lands but that of Possession’ rarely bothered to ‘improve one Tract longer than two or three Years, when they explore some new Spot and cultivate the same, until it begins to grow impoverished’.⁵⁵

Nonetheless, subsequent claims by Loyalist émigrés, boasting of their own ‘uncommon exertions in Planting and Commerce’, that these had been ‘objects before little understood or wholly neglected’ in the Bahamas were overstated. In 1784, staple

⁵³ Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:267–70, 273–82, 289–95 (first quotation at 267, second at 268); Wilson, ‘Report on the Bahama Islands’, 1784, quoted in Stark, *History and Guide*, 172 (third quotation); Eve to Cox, Cat Island, 29 May 1784, CO23/26/204; Wyllie, *Short Account*, 3–4; on salt production see also Cynthia M. Kennedy, ‘The Other White Gold: Salt, slaves, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and British colonialism’, *The Historian*, 69:2 (Summer 2007), 215–30;

⁵⁴ Eve to Cox, Cat Island, 29 May 1784, CO23/26/204; Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:273–83 (quotation at 283); Kelly, *Eighteenth-Century Seaman*, 112; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:79–80, 85–9, 249–50.

⁵⁵ Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:273; Governor Thomas Shirley to Lord Dartmouth, 28 November 1773, quoted in Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:165; on the Lords Proprietors, see Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:92–103.

foods such as corn, yams, plantains and potatoes were cultivated on all the settled islands, and the Out Islanders grew sugar cane for their own use. Citrus fruits, especially limes, were exported ‘in great quantity’ to North America, and one New Providence fruit plantation was said to have turned a profit equivalent to over £400 sterling in a single year. Bahamian pineapples could fetch up to eight shillings each in London, and Schoepf reported that ‘many acres of land are every year set with this excellent fruit’.⁵⁶ Cotton, which took ‘quick and strong hold of the rocky soil’, was already being grown with some success, especially on Cat and Long Islands.⁵⁷ Many stories circulated of how ‘very poor’ people who had ‘attended to the cultivation of it... have in a few years, become wealthy’, such as Pennsylvanian Abraham Pratt, who had supposedly ‘acquired a Fortune of Five or Six Thousand Pounds’ through planting cotton on Cat Island in the 1770s.⁵⁸

However, the extent of pre-Loyalist Bahamian agriculture should not be exaggerated. By one estimate, ‘at the utmost there were not 500 acres of cultivated land upon all these Islands’ in 1784. As well as manufactured goods, the colony relied on imports of meat, rice, wheat and butter from Europe and North America.⁵⁹ Even the more commercially-oriented farmers on Long Island spent much of their time felling timber, while Schoepf reckoned that on New Providence, ‘the so-called planters work, all told, perhaps not more than two, at most three months in the year.’ A Georgian Loyalist who visited the colony in 1783 ‘to see, whether I could settle in this Country, with any prospect of advantage’ considered it ‘very doubtful, whether more than 8 or 10 Negroes, could be profitably employed on any one Plantation I have seen’.⁶⁰

In the absence of the sort of large scale, export-oriented plantation systems found in the Caribbean and the American South, the Bahamas in 1784 were very

⁵⁶ Memorial of ‘Planters and other Inhabitants’ of Abaco, n.d., enclosure in Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 12 March 1788, CO23/27/119; ‘Account of the principal islands’, c. February 1784, Liverpool Papers, Add. MSS 38375, ff. 120–24; Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:270–72.

⁵⁷ Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:269; ‘Account of the principal islands’, c. February 1784, Liverpool Papers, Add. MSS 38375, ff. 121, 124.

⁵⁸ Wilson, ‘Report on the Bahama Islands’, 1784, quoted in Stark, *History and Guide*, 173; Oswald Eve to Daniel Cox, Cat Island, 29 May 1784, CO23/26/204; this account of Pratt’s success was later elaborated by Eve’s son Joseph in ‘Cotton Planting’, *Bahama Gazette*, 15 April 1800.

⁵⁹ Wylly, *Short Account*, 5; Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:272.

⁶⁰ ‘Account of the principal islands’, c. February 1784, Liverpool Papers, Add. MSS 38375, f. 121; Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:301; ‘Extract of a Letter from Lewis Johns[t]on Esq. to Lt Gov Graham’, New Providence, July 1783, CO23/26/26.

much a 'society with slaves', in which 'slavery was just one form of labor among many', and 'no-one presumed the master-slave relationship to be the social exemplar.' Ira Berlin observes that 'superficially, slavery in such societies might appear milder', and that 'slaveholdings... were generally small, and the line between slave and free could be remarkably fluid, with manumission often possible'.⁶¹

Indeed, it was and is not at all clear how many of the roughly 2,300 Bahamians described as 'people of colour' in 1784 were slaves. Although most accounts state that 'a great proportion... were free',⁶² the failure of almost all comprehensive Bahamian population counts up to this point to differentiate free and enslaved non-whites is surely revealing in itself. Notably, free people of colour had had to be arrested and whipped to enforce their compliance with the 1734 census, which had drawn such a distinction.⁶³ Nonetheless, it seems likely that, at any rate, the Bahamas were a society with a lot of slaves, especially on New Providence, where the ratio of whites to blacks was around 9/5 in 1773.⁶⁴

Berlin emphasises that 'neither mildness nor openness *defined* societies with slaves', and it should be stressed that there was nothing benign about pre-Loyalist slavery. The slave code enacted in 1767 sanctioned the death penalty for slaves convicted of damage or theft of property valued at six shillings or more. Slaves who assaulted whites were to suffer a whipping for a first offence, facial branding or mutilation for a second, and the gallows for a third. Whites who killed slaves 'by accident' were 'not liable to any punishment therefore, but the owner's action by law for the value of the Negro or other slave'. Black people were of course barred from testifying against whites, 'except in matters of debt'. Manumitted non-whites were distinguished from those born free by being subject to the same criminal penalties and summary mode of trial as slaves; people of both categories could forfeit their freedom for harbouring runaways, or for non-payment of fines. Another statute of 1768

⁶¹ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 8.

⁶² Wylly, *Short Account*, 5; cf. Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:301.

⁶³ Saunders, *Slavery in the Bahamas*, 2–5; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:138–9.

⁶⁴ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:162; for estimates of the free coloured population after the Loyalist migration see pp. 138–9 below.

restricted manumission by requiring payment of a £90 bond for the good behaviour of freedpeople.⁶⁵

The extent to which these regulations were actively and consistently enforced is impossible to gauge, and many of the provisions might best be taken as a statement of intent on the part of the legislators. Overt acts of resistance, however, could certainly prompt an indiscriminate ruthlessness. Peter Henry Bruce relates an incident from the 1740s when a slave who had fired at and wounded an overseer ‘was hanged, and his innocent companion was also hanged, to bear him company.’ On Harbour Island and Eleuthera, masters largely enforced their own disciplinary and behavioural norms directly, without recourse to law. An Anglican missionary there was told by ‘two or three of the principal Men in this place... *that if they saw any of their Slaves with Books in their Hands they would cut them to pieces, for they were only made to work & serve them.*’⁶⁶

Nonetheless, the experience of black people in the Bahamas was contrasted favourably with that in the plantation societies by observers well acquainted with ‘those many instances of oppression, extortion, and cruelty’ that characterised the latter. Olaudah Equiano had a brief sojourn in New Providence in the spring of 1767, after being shipwrecked en route to Georgia. During his stay, he ‘met with many friends’ among the island’s ‘free black people... who were very happy’, and ‘gave me encouragement to stay there with them.’ Indeed, he acknowledged that ‘had not my heart been fixed on England, I should have stayed, as I liked the place extremely.’ Schoepf had himself witnessed ‘the inhuman and cruel treatment’ meted out on ‘the rice plantations of the mainland’, and aired his disdain for Bahamians who were able to ‘live by the sweat of their slaves’. But he similarly claimed that ‘even the blacks here take part in the general contentment. They are everywhere of a better appearance, breathing happiness; strong, well-fed, and of a decent demeanour.’⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 8 (my emphasis); ‘An Act for the Governing of Negroes, Mulattoes and Indians’, 1767, in Cash et al., eds., *Sources of Bahamian History*, 185–8; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:152–5.

⁶⁶ Bruce, *Memoirs*, 418; Robertson to Porteus, Harbour Island, 17 June 1790, Fulham Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, American Colonial Section, vol. XV, f. 81 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁷ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (first published in 1789) in Henry Louis Gates, jr. & William L. Andrews, eds., *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five slave narratives from the Enlightenment, 1772–1815* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas, 1998), 266, 293–301; Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:301; Schoepf’s account of South Carolina is at 2:156–223.

In some respects, racial boundaries in the Bahamas could be notably imprecise and flexible. By the terms of the 1756 ‘Act to ascertain who shall not be deemed Mulattoes’, individuals who were ‘above three degrees removed’ in lineal descent from a ‘negro ancestor’ were entitled to ‘all the privileges and immunities of his Majesty’s white subjects’. Craton and Saunders argue that this law was principally ‘designed to limit upward mobility and reinforce white dominance’, and it certainly both invoked and re-affirmed an existing hierarchy of phenotypical privilege. But it also provided at least some explicit legal confirmation of the civil and political rights of Bahamians who, elsewhere, would surely have been regarded as ‘people of colour’: it has been estimated that by the 1770s as many as one in five Bahamians ‘were neither unequivocally black nor white, and neither slave nor fully free.’⁶⁸

With the frontiers of race so loosely defined, it was sporadically possible for things to happen that would have been almost inconceivable elsewhere in anglophone America, or indeed in the Bahamas themselves in the nineteenth century. From 1699–1701, the colony was ruled by deputy Governor Read Elding, a ‘mulatto captain’ who had previously led expeditions against piracy.⁶⁹ In June 1784, the House of Assembly passed ‘a Bill for granting certain privileges to John Kemp a Man of Colour’. This may well have been the same John Kemp who had been elected to the Assembly in April, but had not taken the ‘usual oaths’ administered to new members, and whose ‘five prime Country Born Negroes’ were sold at auction after his death in 1790.⁷⁰

More mundanely, Bahamian non-whites might ‘own houses and plantations, and others are even put in command of small vessels’. Many slaves in New Providence worked on self-hire conditions, under which ‘by paying a small weekly sum, they are left undisturbed in the enjoyment of what they gain by other work.’ They often made a living in the same way as ‘the poorer white inhabitants’, by fishing, hunting, cutting wood and wrecking.⁷¹

⁶⁸ ‘An Act, to ascertain who shall not be deemed mulattoes’, 29 Geo. II, *Acts of Assembly of the Bahama Islands: from the Year 1764, to the Year 1799, inclusive* (Nassau, 1801), 32; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1: 151–2.

⁶⁹ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:106–7.

⁷⁰ *The Journal of the General Assembly of the Bahama Islands from the 21st December, 1779 to the 13th February, 1786* (Nassau, 1912), session commencing 20 April 1784, 30, 33, 1–3; *Bahama Gazette*, 20 August 1790. On legislative grants of privileges to specific people of colour in Jamaica see Gad Heuman, *Between Black and White: Race, politics and the free coloreds in Jamaica, 1742–1865* (Westport: Greenwood, 1981), 5–6.

⁷¹ Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:301, 273, 276, 289–92.

The experience of labouring side by side at much the same kind of work could result in interactions between black and white Bahamians reminiscent of the kind of ‘sawbuck equality’ that had often characterised race relations in the American South and elsewhere before the rise of the plantation complex.⁷² Nor were the Bahamas any exception to the pattern of an ‘Atlantic maritime culture’ incorporating ‘strong egalitarian impulses that frequently confounded the strict racial etiquette of slave societies’.⁷³ Richard Nisbet, an idiosyncratic antislavery writer (and slaveholder) from St. Vincent, related an encounter with two Bahamian wrecking vessels whose crews ‘consisted chiefly of about fourteen or fifteen active, robust, animated and intelligent Negroes’. He was much impressed by the ‘cordial congratulations and inquiries’ between them and ‘their old master’ as an instance of ‘the best affections of human nature, void of art and disguise’.⁷⁴

Wrecking held out the potential of handsome gains for black sailors, and this was even more the case when imperial conflict presented opportunities for the unequivocally predatory maritime activities to which the islands’ location was ideally suited. Adjacent to the Gulf Stream and the major Atlantic trade routes, Bahamian mariners were well aware that ‘in time of War no part of the World is better calculated for annoying and distressing our Enemies,’ and that, moreover, privateering could be an incredibly lucrative pursuit. Governor John Tinker claimed in 1748 that it was possible for ‘a Common Seaman, nay a Negroe Slave,... [to] step on board a Privateer and in a Six week Cruise return often with a Booty of a hundred pound Sterling to his share.’⁷⁵

Initially, this was very much the case when, from 1778, the intervention of continental European powers turned the American Revolutionary War into a global imperial struggle. Between June 1780 and April 1782 at least 127 prize vessels were condemned at Nassau’s vice-admiralty court. However, New Providence was poorly

⁷² Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 26–8, 65–7; Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 54–76; T. H. Breen & Stephen Innes, *“Myne Own Ground”: Race and Freedom on Virginia’s Eastern Shore, 1640–1676* (1980; New York: OUP, 2005 edn.); Wood, *Black Majority*, 95–103.

⁷³ Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 75–92 (quotation at 91).

⁷⁴ Richard Nisbet, *The Capacity of Negroes for Religious and Moral Improvement Considered: with cursory hints, to proprietors and to government, for the immediate melioration of the Condition of Slaves in the Sugar Colonies* (London, 1789), 54–5. On Nisbet see Davis, *Age of Revolution*, 226, n. 19, 535.

⁷⁵ ‘Report of the Committee appointed to take into consideration the state of the Bahama Islands’, 28 April 1789, CO23/29/172; Tinker, April 1748, quoted in Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:147.

defended, and the two week occupation in 1776 by an America expedition had shown that the colonists had little stomach for serious resistance against a superior invader. On 6 May 1782, Governor John Maxwell surrendered the Bahamas to a Spanish-American invasion force led by the captain-general of Havana, comprising over 50 warships and transports and 2,000 soldiers.⁷⁶

Although a substantial garrison was stationed in Nassau, the subsequent occupation's impact was relatively limited. Most colonial officials remained in post, British courts continued to operate, and the Spanish presence in the Out Islands was negligible. It was never likely that Spain would permanently retain the islands, and their return to British rule was provisionally agreed upon in the preliminary articles of peace agreed in Paris in January 1783. However, as negotiations over the final treaty dragged on into the spring, Loyalists in East Florida impatient with the speed of 'the great Engines by which Government is upheld' decided to take matters into their own hands.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 153–9; Lewis, *Final Campaign*, 18–30.

⁷⁷ Lewis, *Final Campaign*, 43–54; 'Preliminary Articles of Peace between Spain and England', 20 January 1783, Lockey, *East Florida*, 54–5; Tonym to Townshend, St. Augustine, 15 May 1783, Lockey, *East Florida*, 96.

III: The ‘Loyalist’ Migration to the Bahamas

Andrew Deveaux, jr., variously ascribed the ranks of colonel, lieutenant colonel and major by different sources, was the son of a wealthy South Carolina planter, and sometime commander of a Loyalist unit called the ‘Royal Forresters’. Early in 1783, he assembled a motley band of about 70 East Florida Loyalist émigrés, who set out in six small ships on 1 April to seize the Bahamas from the 600 strong Spanish garrison commanded by Don Antonio Claraco y Sanz. Deveaux, ‘by an allowable artifice’, exaggerated his strength and bluffed Claraco into surrendering on 18 April.

This unlikely and largely bloodless victory undoubtedly made for a good story, one that even ‘attracted the King’s particular attention’. Of course, the reluctance of the Spanish troops to put up a serious fight probably owed less to ‘the intrepid and spirited conduct of Major Deveaux’ than to the fact that news of the treaty returning the Bahamas to Britain reached Nassau a few days before he did.⁷⁸

In due course, this almost wholly inconsequential feat of arms would take on the status of ‘the central legend’ in Bahamian Loyalists’ mythicised version of their own history. For a long time, the historiography dutifully echoed the story of ‘this brilliant exploit’ as ‘a Loyalist victory’ conducted with ‘a degree of gallantry and address that have seldom been equalled.’⁷⁹ Less convenient details were ignored or played down. The Bahamian contribution to the expedition, including ‘almost the entire male population and most of the local ships’ from Harbour Island, greatly outweighed the Loyalist element; many, perhaps most of these people were black, as indeed were at least some of the contingent from Florida.⁸⁰

The white émigrés lost little time in framing their relocation to the Bahamas in similar terms, as a heroic narrative of Loyalists’ ‘voluntary sacrifice’ for the sake of their ‘most animated regard, and affection, for the parent state’, and their attachment to ‘the best of Kings’. They had ‘chose, to explore, unsettled and unknown countries, in quest of new habitations under her mild and equitable authority’. From their arrival, the Bahamas were to be ‘considered as altogether a New Country’, since it was ‘from

⁷⁸ Tonym to Townshend, St. Augustine, 15 May 1783; North to Carleton, London, 8 August 1783, both in Davies, ed., *Documents*, 21:169, 254; on Deveaux see Lewis, *Final Campaign*, 61–80; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:169–71.

⁷⁹ Craton, ‘Hopetown and Hard Bargain’, 252; Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 161; Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 131; Wylly, *Short Account*, 6.

⁸⁰ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders* 1:170; Lewis, *Final Campaign*, 64–5; see also pp. 176–7 below.

that period [that] their importance as a colony may be dated.’ There, ‘their exertions and industry’ were such that ‘in the term of no more than three years’ they had ‘rescued the Bahamas from insignificance’.⁸¹ The blatantly self-aggrandizing nature of this account of the post-Revolutionary migration to the Bahamas will be readily apparent. As with Deveaux’s taking of Nassau, a rather complicated and many-sided process was reduced to a more straightforward story of white Loyalist agency that wilfully obscured the roles of various other factors and protagonists.

For the majority of émigrés who came to the Bahamas via East Florida, theirs was anything but a voluntary sacrifice, or even a willing one. By 1783, East Florida had become the focus of Southern Loyalist efforts to build new lives within the British empire.⁸² For many Loyalists, the decision to return the colony to Spain was ‘the severest shock our feelings have ever had to struggle with.’ They had come to regard their possession of East Florida as a due compensation for having ‘borne arms, exposed our lives and sacrificed our properties, encountering innumerable hardships in the service of Britain’. Now, they were ‘abandoned by their Prince’, and ‘plunged in the torrent of misery and despair’ by ‘the unprecedented cruelty of the British parliament’, who, it seemed, on finding ‘no further occasion for their services treat them with contempt and mock their sorrows’. For many Loyalists, it was not ‘the pleasing consolation, of having preferred our duty, to our interest’ that brought them to the Bahamas with ‘minds buoy’d up above the sense of sufferings’. Rather, it was the ‘satisfaction’ of recalling, as the young South Carolinian exile John Mulryne Tattnell put it, ‘that it was not I who deserted my King but my King that deserted me’. In a few years, Tattnell would be venting his resentments in violence against Nassau’s black community.⁸³

Loyalists’ reluctance to leave East Florida also reflected the unattractiveness of the options for resettlement. Official confirmation that the colony was to be evacuated left many residents ‘quite at a loss how to dispose of themselves.’ Governor Tonyn

⁸¹ Memorial of the Board of American Loyalists to George III, Nassau, September 1785, CO5/561/3; Memorial of ‘Planters and other Inhabitants’ of Abaco, n.d., enclosure in Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 12 March 1788, CO23/27/119; ‘Extract of a Letter from an American Loyalist, now settled as New Providence’, n.d. [after 18 May 1784], CO23/26/162; Wylly, *Short Account*, 6; Petition for dissolution of the House of Assembly, New Providence, 2 January 1788, CO23/27/102.

⁸² Troxler, ‘Refuge, Resistance, and Reward’, 563–4.

⁸³ [John] M. Tattnell to John Street, St. Augustine, 30 May 1783, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 21:173–4; Cruden, *Address*, 4. On Tattnell see Sabine, *Biographical Sketches*, 847; for his later exploits in the Bahamas see pp. 153–4 below.

observed that ‘the unremitting heat of the climate is with many a formidable objection’ to going to the Caribbean, while conversely, Nova Scotia was ‘too cold a climate for those who have lived in the Southern Colonies’. The Bahamas were ‘mere rocks, fit only for fishermen, and the Inhabitants live chiefly by wrecking’.⁸⁴

Aside from such climatic preferences, however, slavery was a key factor constraining Loyalists’ choice of destinations. Slaves were crucial to ‘the hopes of southern Loyalists for a continuation of their accustomed life in British America’. They were also the only readily moveable property that most émigrés possessed, and slave prices in East Florida collapsed in 1783–4 amid the rush to liquidate assets prior to departure.⁸⁵ The sugar colonies demanded ‘a greater capital than in general they possessed’, and in June 1783, an address to Tonyn protesting the abandonment of East Florida was in no doubt that ‘neither Nova Scotia nor the Bahama Islands can answer for commodious habitations to the owners of Slaves.’⁸⁶

The reports of Loyalists who visited the Bahamas in the summer of 1783 largely confirmed this impression. Georgian Lewis Johnston’s ‘expectations’ as to whether enslaved labour might be profitably exploited there, ‘tho’ by no means sanguine’ were ‘cruelly disappointed’ by what he saw, leaving him ‘as much at a loss as ever where to direct my Steps’. In large part, it was the absence of ‘better prospects’ that left Johnston, like many of the other ‘Principal Inhabitants’ of East Florida who signed the June address, ‘obliged to return to this poor Country.’⁸⁷

Despite the East Florida Loyalists’ sense of having been abandoned and even betrayed by Britain, their ‘distressed situation’ was a ‘matter of much perplexity and embarrassment’ to the imperial government. That around a quarter of the white émigrés eventually went to the Bahamas also owed something to the efforts of ‘the King’s Servants to provide an asylum for those unfortunate people.’ In September, Lord North recommended to the Council for Plantation Affairs that ‘if the Soil of the Bahama Islands was vested in His Majesty they would afford means of Settlement, Subsistence and Improvement to many of those meritorious Subjects’, singling out

⁸⁴ Tonyn to Townshend, St. Augustine, 15 May 1783, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 21:167–8.

⁸⁵ Troxler, ‘Refuge, Resistance, and Reward’, 591; Troxler, ‘British Evacuation’, 14–15.

⁸⁶ Tonyn to Townshend, St. Augustine, 15 May 1783, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 21:167; ‘Address of the Principal Inhabitants’ to Governor Tonyn, St. Augustine, 6 June 1783, Lockey, *East Florida*, 113.

⁸⁷ ‘Extract of a Letter from Lewis Johns[t]on Esq, to Lt Gov Graham’, New Providence, July 1783, CO23/26/26–7.

cotton as ‘an Article that may be produced there in very considerable Quantities’. In the 1780s, cotton was largely an unknown quantity for émigrés from the lower South, but the prospects of free land and free transportation that North outlined in a letter to Tonym of December surely helped make the Bahamas seem like slaveholders’ least worst choice for resettlement.⁸⁸

Nonetheless, the evacuation was a protracted affair. By April 1784, when the first government transport sailed, up to a thousand East Florida émigrés had already arrived in the Bahamas, including the veterans of the King’s Carolina Rangers who established the settlement at Spencer’s Bight on Abaco.⁸⁹ The last transport did not leave Florida until September 1785. Documentation of the migration is predictably far from complete: according to one partial return compiled at the point of departure, 1,033 whites and 2,214 blacks had left East Florida for the Bahamas by 1786. These figures probably exclude people travelling via private shipping.⁹⁰ Working from the opposite direction, using Bahamian demographic sources, raises other issues. As Craton and Saunders observe, ‘the population changes brought about by the Loyalist migration are difficult to assess with complete accuracy because of inefficient censuses and constant re-migration.’⁹¹

But in some respects, the greatest problem for the 1780s is not so much a lack of evidence, as what amounts to almost a surfeit of apparently inconsistent information from various sources. Of these, two have been cited most often by modern historians. The first is the ‘State of the Population, Agriculture, &c. of the BAHAMA ISLANDS in June, 1788’ in William Wyly’s 1789 *Short Account of the Bahama Islands*, said to have been ‘carefully collected from particular Returns received from the particular Islands.’ The other source is the ‘Report of the Committee appointed to take into consideration the State of the Bahama Islands’, endorsed by the

⁸⁸ Lord North’s representation to the Committee of Council for Plantation Affairs, 17 September 1783, George Chalmers Papers, John Carter Brown Library (microfilm copy in BDA; hereafter cited as Chalmers Papers, JCBL), reel 1; North to Tonym, 4 December 1783, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 21:251; for estimates of the proportions of East Florida émigrés going to various destinations of re-settlement see Troxler, ‘Refuge, Resistance, and Reward’, 564–5.

⁸⁹ Walker to Lincoln, Nassau, 10 February 1784, CO23/26/46; ‘Account of the principal islands’, c. February 1784, Add. MSS 38375, f. 123; Gen. Archibald McArthur to Sydney, Nassau, 1 March 1784, CO23/25/69. McArthur, previously garrison commander in East Florida, came to Nassau as acting governor in January 1784.

⁹⁰ Troxler, ‘British Evacuation’, 21–3, 27. The East Florida return was compiled by William Brown, the Speaker of the East Florida Assembly, and was included by Tonym in a despatch to London of 2 May 1786.

⁹¹ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:420, n. 1.

House of Assembly in April 1789.⁹² Typically, the secondary literature acknowledges (and often directly reproduces) Wylly's data, before asserting, with varying degrees of confidence and qualification, that 1,600 whites and 5,700 blacks settled in the islands, for a total of 7,300 Loyalist émigrés.⁹³ These numbers are arrived at by simply aggregating the estimates of population increase since 1784 presented in the 1789 report.

Wylly's data are rather more detailed than the report, providing figures for the distribution of the 'old' and 'new' colonists across the individual islands. Unfortunately, they are notably vague regarding the overall numbers of whites and free people of colour, and hence do not do not readily lend themselves to a clear reckoning of the total population in 1788. Nevertheless, Wylly only lists a total of 3,762 'new' slaves, which, even adding the 350 'people of Colour, either free, or pretending to be so' mentioned in Wylly's text, falls markedly short of the 1789 report's 5,700 black arrivals.⁹⁴ In turn, even these numbers are far greater than those of the 1786 'Return of Persons who emigrated from East Florida', according to which just 3,247 Florida evacuees went to the Bahamas.⁹⁵

However, with careful scrutiny and the use of some neglected additional sources, it is possible to largely reconcile these discrepancies, and arrive at a hopefully more accurate estimate of the number of Loyalists in the Bahamas. Firstly, let us re-consider the 1789 report. This document states that there were 1,700 whites and 2,300 blacks in the Bahamas in 1784, and that by 1786, 1,200 whites and 3,600 blacks had arrived. By 1789, there were said to be a further 400 whites and 2,100 blacks. Of this increase, only the first 1,200 whites are explicitly described as 'Loyalists'.⁹⁶

⁹² Wylly, *Short Account*, 7; 'Report of the Committee appointed to take into consideration the State of the Bahama Islands', 28 April 1789, CO23/29/172-7.

⁹³ See for example Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:179-80; Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 11; Craton, 'Loyalists Mainly to Themselves', 44; Craton, 'Hopetown and Hard Bargain,' 252. Whittington Bernard Johnson cites the Wylly table from the copy of Wylly's *Short Account* at CO23/29/191-213, but rather confusingly describes it both as 'a government report', and as being the work of the SPG missionary William Robertson; see Johnson, *Race Relations*, 12-14, 208, n. 62. Thelma Peters was rather more circumspect, suggesting a total of 5-7,000 émigrés, in 'American Loyalists and the Plantation Period', 69. The most detailed demographic discussion, largely refraining from firm conclusions, appears in Saunders, *Slavery in the Bahamas*, 11-15. Various estimates drawn from printed and secondary sources are cited in Wilkie & Farnsworth, *Sampling Many Pots*, 29-30.

⁹⁴ Wylly, *Short Account*, 7-8.

⁹⁵ Troxler, 'British Evacuation', 21.

⁹⁶ 'Report of the Committee appointed to take into consideration the State of the Bahama Islands', 28 April 1789, CO23/29/173.

Considering that the evacuations of New York and East Florida were effectively complete by the end of 1785, with the last government transport leaving Florida by September, it does indeed seem eminently probable that the overwhelming majority of Loyalist émigrés from North America had reached the Bahamas by 1786.⁹⁷

Another important set of population statistics for the 1780s appears in a document entitled ‘A Circumstantial view of the Bahama Islands’, dating from the ‘latter part of the year 1785, being twelve months after the accession of the Loyal Refugees from the province of East Florida.’ Although at least four versions of this document exist in various manuscript collections, all are anonymous, and only one has any explicit indication of the date of compilation; this may account for the minimal use historians have made of it.⁹⁸ The ‘Circumstantial view of the Bahama Islands’ gives the ‘old’ population as 1,722 whites, and 2,333 ‘Coloured’, with 1,226 ‘new’ whites and 3,673 non-whites.⁹⁹ In one version of the document, the number of ‘new Inhabitants’ is said to be ‘ascertained from the Ration and Donation Lists’, and that of ‘the Old Inhabitants from the poll Tax, Old Muster Rolls and parish Registers.’¹⁰⁰ This information was certainly available in the Bahamas during the 1780s; a 1789 newspaper article presents the same totals of the old and new populations in 1785.¹⁰¹ These numbers also correspond very closely with those in the 1789 report for the population in 1784 and 1786; quite possibly the committee of the House of Assembly that produced the 1789 report simply rounded the 1785 figures to the nearest hundred.

A summary of Wyllly’s ‘State of the Population’ in June 1788 was sent to the Secretary of State around 1790 by lieutenant John Mowbray, a naval officer and

⁹⁷ Troxler, ‘British Evacuation’, 23; Tanner, *Zéspedes*, 65; American troops occupied New York on 25 November 1783; Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 148.

⁹⁸ ‘A Circumstantial view of the Bahama Islands in the latter part of the year 1785, being twelve months after the accession of the Loyal Refugees from the province of East Florida’, Chalmers Papers, JCBL, reel 1. Versions of the same document exist as ‘Bahama Islands’, Liverpool Papers, Add. MSS 38346, ff. 56–7; ‘Bahama Islands’, CO23/30/334–5; ‘An Account of the Quantity of Land &c. and of the Number of Inhabitants’, CO37/23/3. For convenience, subsequent references are generally to the Liverpool Papers version. To my knowledge, the material from these documents has only previously been used in Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 185, 187, and Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 166; in the latter, the numbers are reproduced without an indication of the source. The CO23/30 version is mentioned in Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:421, n. 1, but seems not to have directly informed their discussion of population.

⁹⁹ ‘Bahama Islands’ [1785], Add. MSS 38346, f. 56.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Circumstantial view of the Bahama Islands’, Chalmers Papers, JCBL, reel 1.

¹⁰¹ *Bahama Gazette*, 11 April 1789.

planter who had spent ten months in the Bahamas before returning to England.¹⁰² Although this version lacks any breakdown of the population by islands, it does include figures for the total white and free coloured populations, making it possible to calculate totals of 1,720 old whites, 2,324 old non-whites, and 1,320 new whites and 3,912 new blacks. The first set of numbers is almost identical with those in the 1785 ‘Circumstantial View’, and the 1789 report, strongly suggesting a common source.

What remains to be accounted for is the slightly larger ‘new’ population in the 1788 data, and the bigger increase of 2,500 people between 1786–9 mentioned in the 1789 report. While there may have been stragglers who stayed in East Florida until after the official evacuation had been completed, there were reportedly no more than 1,500 British residents still in Florida by the time Governor Zéspedes arrived in June 1784, and at least 500 of them stayed. Although individuals and family groups, including William Wylly himself, continued to arrive from Britain, Canada and elsewhere in the later 1780s, there is nothing to indicate any further mass migrations of Loyalists after 1785.¹⁰³

However, there were other substantial groups of immigrants in this period. In 1787, a group of 187 evacuees from St. Andreas, on the Mosquito Shore, settled on Andros.¹⁰⁴ These people can plausibly account for much of the difference in the numbers of ‘New Inhabitants’ between the 1785 ‘Circumstantial View’ and 1788 ‘State of the Population’; notably, the former does not include any new settlers on Andros, whereas the latter lists 132 slaves and 22 white families.¹⁰⁵

Crooked Island was apparently uninhabited in 1785, and is described as ‘newly settled’ in 1788, when there were 357 slaves but only 5 white ‘heads of families’. Cotton planters from Grenada had begun relocating to the island with their own slaves by 1789, and at least 700 people were reported to be living there in 1790. Similarly,

¹⁰² ‘State of the Population &c. of the Bahama Islands in the Month of June 1788’, CO23/30/336. Mowbray had owned ‘considerable property’ in St. Augustine ‘at the commencement of the late War’, and was a member of the East Florida Assembly in 1781; see Mowbray to Grenville, London, 15 December 1790, CO23/30/354; Feldman, ed., *Last Days*, 83, 90.

¹⁰³ Tanner, *Zéspedes*, 35; Troxler, ‘Refuge, Resistance, and Reward’, 565; extracts from the Spanish ‘List of all English residents at the time of the Change of the Flag’, compiled c. August 1784, and now in the East Florida Papers, LC, appear in Feldman, ed., *Last Days*.

¹⁰⁴ Minutes of Council, 15 March 1787, CO23/27/51; Brown to Sydney, Nassau, 3 October 1787, CO23/27/63. Since the Mosquito Shore was partly colonised by Loyalists, including at least fifty families from East Florida, these settlers may have constituted part of the Loyalist diaspora. See Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 184.

¹⁰⁵ Wylly, *Short Account*, 7.

the Caicos Islands were first settled in 1787, and the 214 slaves there in 1788 had increased to 600 by 1790, partly augmented by migrating planters from Bermuda and Grenada.¹⁰⁶

Finally, the Bahamas began to import slaves in substantial numbers from 1788. Almost 800 Africans arrived in 1788 and 1789 (along with several hundred more slaves from the West Indies). These are the ‘New Negroes Imported for sale’ who are explicitly described in the 1789 report as forming part of the 1786–9 population growth.¹⁰⁷

The bulk of that growth can be satisfactorily ascribed to these various post-Loyalist arrivals. That a substantial portion of it was derived from the transatlantic slave trade also helps to explain the disproportionate increase in the black population after 1786. Therefore, the most plausible estimate of the overall scale of the immediate post-Revolutionary migration from the mainland is provided by the figures that appear in the 1789 report and the 1785 ‘Circumstantial View’, of around 1,200 whites and 3,600 blacks.

The white Loyalists, of course, were the immigrants who drew most attention to themselves, and who pronounced their arrival to be a singularly pivotal event in Bahamian history. Certainly, their settlement can plausibly be seen as a catalyst for much of the subsequent immigration from elsewhere. But in Bahamian historiography, a rather diverse assortment of immigrants during the 1780s, who came from Central America, the Caribbean and Africa as well as North America, has too often been lumped together with, and obscured by, the convenient formula of ‘the Loyalist migration’.

Nor will the generally accepted view that, aside from the New York group, the vast majority of the African Americans who arrived in the Bahamas with the Loyalists

¹⁰⁶ ‘Bahama Islands’, [1785], Add. MSS 38346, f. 56; Wylly, *Short Account*, 7; ‘Observations by Lord Dunmore on such of the Bahama Islands as he visited’, 1 September 1790, CO23/30/239, 242; List of Plantations on Crooked Island, 20 August 1791, CO23/31/228; Petition of John Hanna, a Planter of Crooked Island, 14 March 1798, LC, Force Papers, series 8A, #11, f. 7; Memorial of the Inhabitants and Planters of Grand Caicos, n.d., enclosure in Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 28 August 1792, CO23/31/147.

¹⁰⁷ Wilkie & Farnsworth, *Sampling Many Pots*, 49; lists of ships entering Nassau, 4 July to 3 December 1788, CO23/29/67–70; ‘Report of the Committee appointed to take into consideration the State of the Bahama Islands’, 28 April 1789, CO23/29/173.

‘unequivocally remained chattel slaves’ bear much critical scrutiny.¹⁰⁸ Although the handful of extant returns of the arrival of East Florida émigrés in the Bahamas (largely compiled, one assumes, either by or with the assistance of white Loyalists) do appear to support this interpretation,¹⁰⁹ in the absence of complete records, it is a matter of plausible assumption rather than evidence. In view of the complexities and ambiguities attendant on the status of African Americans in East Florida explored in section I, it seems very reasonable to infer that a substantial proportion of the black émigrés were people for whom revolution and migration had offered an escape from the rigours of the mainland slave regime, or even a tantalising taste of life as free people. The very different, and often contradictory aspirations of émigrés and Bahamians, black and white, would be dramatically played out over the following years.

¹⁰⁸ Craton, ‘Loyalists Mainly to Themselves’, 45; the best Bahamian historiography repeats this assumption tentatively and with some degree of qualification. For instance, Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:179 refers to ‘fifty-seven hundred slaves and free blacks’, but the formulation of ‘American Loyalists and their slaves’ used to open the same paragraph is more representative of the prevalent approach.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Return of Refugees in the Elizabeth’, Nassau, 30 June 1784; ‘Account of Settlers on board the Ship Spring, Transport’, Nassau, n.d.; ‘Return of Blacks and Whites landed out of the Transport Charlotte’, Nassau, 24 June 1784, all in Registry Office Book M, RGD, ff. 31, 81–2, 29. The only free non-whites mentioned in these returns are five people from the *Elizabeth*.

Chapter Three

Rescuing the Bahamas from Insignificance: Transformations, Compromises, and Resistance in the 1780s

The migrations of the 1780s profoundly affected the Bahamas. If the scale of the immediate post-revolutionary influx of Loyalists and African Americans has usually been overstated, its demographic impact alone was still enormous and far-reaching. Between 1783–5, the colony's population more than doubled, and in 1789 the islands contained nearly three times as many people as in 1783. At that time, the ratio of white to 'coloured' inhabitants was almost even; by 1785, it was less than one to two. As well as rapidly increasing, the population's distribution across the islands changed markedly. Nearly two-thirds of Bahamians had lived on New Providence before the migrations. In 1788, the proportion had fallen to about forty percent. The 'old inhabitants' largely stayed where they were, while three-fifths of the immigrants took up residence on Abaco and southern Out Islands that had previously been populated either sparsely or not at all.¹

But the Loyalist émigrés envisaged that the Bahamas 'will soon prove, respectable' in terms of far more than merely 'the number of their inhabitants'. The islands were also to be their means of securing 'those rewards, and that compensation, we have a right to expect from the justice, and benevolence of the nation'. The story of how the Bahamian Loyalists sought to realise their 'driving ambition to remake their fortunes and to assume positions of leadership in the government' has often been told.² In doing so, reliance on their own words and documents, which constitute so much of the evidence that has come down to us, has been largely unavoidable. But the extent to which those words have been taken at face value is regrettable, in view of how readily Loyalists re-imagined their own history.

Moreover, most white Loyalists, including the Southerners from East Florida, were the kind of people described by Governor John Maxwell as 'Clerks, Apprentices, Discharg'd Soldiers, Paupers, and Vagabonds.' Historians have sometimes recognised the presence of 'the poorer sort, who constitute by far the greatest part' of the 1,200 or

¹ These proportions are based on the figures in 'Bahama Islands' [1785], Add. MSS 38346, f. 56; 'Report of the Committee appointed to take into consideration the state of the Bahama Islands', 28 April 1789, CO23/29/173; Wylly, *Short Account*, 7; 'State of the Population &c. of the Bahama Islands in the Month of June 1788', CO23/30/336.

² Memorial of the Board of American Loyalists to George III, Nassau, September 1785, CO5/561/7, 6; Peters, 'Loyalist Migration', 140. On Loyalist historiography see pp 24–6 above.

so white émigrés.³ But the term ‘Loyalist’ is still routinely used as a shorthand for the hundred or so ‘White Male Heads of Families’, mostly from the lower South, who were fairly substantial slaveholders, and often from mercantile or professional backgrounds.⁴ This elitist bias reflects the content of the available sources. Like Maxwell, the ‘better sort’ of Loyalists regarded the plebeian majority as ‘the Dregs of an unfortunate and Licentious Army’. Insofar as people lacking ‘the Dignity & Rank of any Person of Character in an elevated Station of Life’ mattered at all, it was merely because their numbers lent credence to claims that ‘Loyalists constitute a large proportion of the population’. For now, it is rarely possible to do more than acknowledge how little is known about the fate of such people outside of the isolated and insular bastions of white separatism that later emerged on Abaco.⁵

The agenda of the Loyalist ‘aristocratic planter-merchant class’ for the future of the Bahamas corresponds closely to Ira Berlin’s outline of ‘the process by which societies with slaves in the Americas became slave societies’. In the first instance, this transition called for ‘the discovery of some commodity... that could command an international market’, and whose production demanded slave labour. As slavery came to dominate the economy, other classes were increasingly marginalised in favour of slaveholders. The Loyalists quickly settled on long staple cotton as the commodity that would work such wonders. The decade following their arrival saw the spread of plantation slavery across the Bahamian Out Islands. But the ‘critical event’ in such transformations was ‘the slaveholders’ seizure of power’. Here too, the elite Loyalists wasted little time. Loudly proclaiming the inadequacy of the governor, legislature, judiciary, state apparatus, and the general ‘want of a Respectable Government’, their

³ Maxwell to Sydney, c. May 1785, quoted in Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 164; Committee of Correspondence to Stokes, Nassau, 9 March 1786, CO23/26/207; see for instance Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:181–2.

⁴ Wylly, *Short Account*, 7; Peters, ‘American Loyalists and the Plantation Period’, 226–7. This figure is broadly consistent with the partial compilation of land grants from the 1780s in A. Talbot Bethell, *The Early Settlers of the Bahamas and Colonists of North America* (3rd rev. edn., Nassau, 1937), 101–9, and the number of signatories to the Loyalist petition in *Bahama Gazette*, 12 March 1785. See also Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:191–2.

⁵ Maxwell to Sydney, Nassau, 19 June 1784, CO23/25/132; ‘Extract of a Letter from an American Loyalist, now settled as New Providence’, n.d. [after 18 May 1784], CO23/26/162 (cf. Maxwell to Gen. McArthur, Nassau, 9 June 1784 (‘Secret and Confidential’), CO23/25/134); Petition for dissolution of the House of Assembly, New Providence, 2 January 1788, CO23/27/102. On nineteenth-century Abaco see Craton, ‘Hopetown and Hard Bargain’, 272–4; Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 193–6, 226–31; Peters, ‘American Loyalists and the Plantation Period’, 62–3.

efforts to install themselves as the colony's ruling class would dominate Bahamian politics for the rest of the century.⁶

However, in the Bahamas, efforts to establish a plantocratic regime faced a third challenge in the decidedly ambiguous post-revolutionary status of the black émigrés. In 1789, a writer for the *Bahama Gazette*, the colony's first newspaper, founded in 1784 by South Carolinian Loyalist John Wells, discussed the prospects of 'this young Colony, where so many new Settlers have embarked the wrecks of property saved from the late storms of civil warfare in America'.⁷ There is only one kind of property that fits this striking metaphor, and by the time it reached the Bahamas, 'wreck' was an apt description. If slaveholders were to harness the labour of African Americans in the Bahamas, they had to be unequivocally confirmed to be slaves, regardless of any claims of entitlement to freedom. Unsurprisingly, Loyalists generally did not draw attention to this drive to re-enslavement, and its extent and significance have not been fully appreciated.

The first two sections of this chapter examine respectively the political and economic consequences of the Loyalist effort to turn the Bahamas into a fully fledged plantation slave society during the 1780s. They seek to show the substantive changes arising from these developments, but also the degree to which they were informed and complicated by a range of factors partly or wholly beyond the white Loyalists' control, and particularly the issues arising from re-enslavement.

The third section explores further how the development of the Bahamian slave regime and the arrival of the black émigrés simultaneously facilitated opportunities for individual and collective autonomy for non-white Bahamians. Their pursuit of such opportunities was very much at odds with Loyalist slaveholders' agenda of re-enslavement and plantocracy, resulting in a trajectory of increasingly direct and violent confrontation towards the end of the decade.

⁶ Peters, 'American Loyalists and the Plantation Period', 226; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 8–10; Wylly to Stokes, 17 July 1789, CO23/29/234.

⁷ *Bahama Gazette*, 11 April 1789.

I: Building a Slave Society: Re-enslavement and ‘Respectable Government’

From their arrival, Loyalists made no secret of their contempt for Bahamians’ way of life, customs and institutions. They openly expressed disdain for a legislature that contained ‘neither a Merchant, nor a Lawyer, nor any man of respectable property’ and ‘a system of jurisprudence, the most ruinous and disgraceful that can well be imagined’. ‘Is it possible’, one émigré would ask, ‘that good Men could respect such a Government?’⁸

Initially, Loyalist agitation for the ‘Establishment of some kind of Respectability in the Government and Judicial Proceedings of the Country’ focused upon the person of John Maxwell, who had returned to the Bahamas in March 1784 to resume the governorship interrupted by the Spanish occupation of 1782–3. He soon found the newcomers so troublesome ‘such has been their Behaviour, that they can go but one Step further in my Opinion, which is, to take the Government from me.’ By July, Loyalists were organising to coordinate ‘their steady and united Exertions to preserve and maintain those Rights and Liberties, for which they left their Homes and their Possessions’.⁹

The increasingly bitter and sometimes openly violent conflict between Maxwell and the ‘Board of American Loyalists’ in 1784 has been widely discussed in Bahamian historiography.¹⁰ But although the dispute’s events and chronology are reasonably well-established, what it was actually about has remained less clear.

The usual approach has been to treat the discord as the playing out of essentially personal animosities, inflamed by the general stress and disruption attendant upon a situation in which émigrés were ‘setting themselves down, where they can; and without order’. Certainly, the mutual antipathy involved is not in question. One Loyalist claimed that Maxwell’s ‘Weakness, his Blunders, his badness of Heart as well as rancorous disposition of Mind, together with an Abhorrence of all in the Character of Loyalists has Concurred to render him despicable among the New

⁸ Wylly, *Short Account*, 17; ‘An American Loyalist’, *Bahama Gazette*, 2 April 1785; Wylly to Stokes, 17 September 1789, CO23/29/234.

⁹ ‘Extract of a Letter from an American Loyalist, now settled as New Providence’, n.d. [after 18 May 1784], CO23/26/161; Maxwell to Sydney, Nassau, 29 March 1784, CO23/25/76; Maxwell to Sydney, Nassau, 17 May 1784, CO23/25/104; handbill advertising ‘General Meeting of the Loyalists’, 27 July 1784, CO23/26/96.

¹⁰ See for instance Peters, ‘American Loyalists and the Plantation Period’, 85–95; Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 166–8; Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 159–64; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:188–91.

Inhabitants in general'. Over a hundred of them would later sign a declaration representing the prospect of 'Mr. Maxwell's return to this Country as the greatest evil that can possibly befall these Islands'. Maxwell in his turn found the Loyalists to be 'the most tormenting, dissatisfied People on Earth.'¹¹

When historians have looked for more concrete issues of contention, they have often resorted to more or less unqualified endorsements of Loyalist allegations of Maxwell's incompetence, pusillanimity and venality.¹² But although his enemies declared that 'it would be endless, to recapitulate, all the instances of Mr Maxwell's injustice and oppression', expositions of Loyalist grievances are conspicuously long on invective, and short on detail, let alone supporting evidence. When the Board of American Loyalists petitioned the king for Maxwell's recall in September 1784, they could come up with precisely three substantive charges against him.

The first was that he 'hath admitted American vessels, to trade, in our ports,' contrary not only to 'the laws of Trade and navigation' but also, supposedly 'the interests of the people'.¹³ Maxwell had indeed temporarily opened Nassau to American shipping, after the *David*, carrying food and other supplies from Britain, was wrecked off the harbour on 1 May 1784. The influx of refugees, most of them entirely lacking the 'Necessaries of Life', had caused severe food shortages, with the 'poorer sort' of émigrés especially suffering 'the most excruciating Distress'.¹⁴ Notably, there is some evidence suggesting that leading members of the Board of American Loyalists had vested interests in the supply of the provisions issued to émigrés by the colonial government.¹⁵ But in any case the 'monstrous offence' that some Loyalists professed at the appearance of 'the American Colours' was hardly

¹¹ Maxwell to Sydney, Nassau, 19 June 1784, CO23/25/132; 'Extract of a Letter from an American Loyalist, now settled as New Providence', n.d. [after 18 May 1784], CO23/26/161; Petition in *Bahama Gazette*, 12 March 1785; Maxwell to Sydney, Nassau, 17 May 1784, CO23/25/104.

¹² This stance is most overt in Peters, 'American Loyalists and the Plantation Period', and Riley, *Homeward Bound*. But Craton & Saunders also have no doubt that 'Maxwell certainly lacked capacities': see *Islanders*, 1:189.

¹³ Memorial of the Board of American Loyalists to George III, Nassau, 20 September 1785, CO5/561/5-6.

¹⁴ Maxwell to Sydney, Nassau, 17 May 1784, CO23/25/104; Maxwell to Tonyn, Nassau, CO23/25/128; Committee of Correspondence to Stokes, Nassau, 9 March 1786, CO23/26/207.

¹⁵ 'Provisions Lent by William Moss & others and by them Issued to the Loyalists & their Slaves that arrived in the Ships Wm. & Mary & Polly from East Florida by Order of Lieu^t Gov^r Powell', Nassau, 19 August 1785, LC Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection, Moss, William (1/1). James Hepburn and John M. Tattnell were other members of the Board of American Loyalists named as suppliers of food in this document. See also Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 21 April 1788, CO23/27/160.

sufficient in itself to render 'the removal of Governor Maxwell as a point essential to their very existence as a people'.¹⁶

The other two accusations in the Loyalist memorial refer to a more serious issue, albeit in a deliberately cryptic way. The governor had sent a 'message' urging the Assembly 'to pass a law, to dispossess, the American Loyalists, of part of their property, without an appeal to the laws of their country, or the benefit of that inestimable right, the trial by Jury.' Then, in a new paragraph, as a separate and distinct charge, his 'influence' is said to have led to the passage of 'a law... to enslave those, whom the different commanders in chief in America, had manumitted for their zeal, and services, during the war.'¹⁷

The wording of these charges was brazenly obfuscatory; Loyalists were imputing the blame for re-enslavement of black émigrés to Maxwell, having just denounced him, in a necessarily oblique manner, for having had the temerity to infringe their dubious property rights by trying to stop the practice.

In May, Maxwell had called the Assembly's attention to the widespread sale of blacks in the Bahamas by 'Vendors [who] came to the possession of them in no other way than of Plunder or false promises'. He invited them to consider whether 'the property in the Slave so acquired [is] legal?', and if 'Slaves so fraudulently obtained to the Disgrace of Christians' should be returned to their original owners. Then, in a speech to both houses of the legislature, he reiterated more explicitly 'that, altho' the Loyalists do not avowedly take to themselves... the Message I sent to the House of Assembly... yet,... the cap Fits a great many of them... without making their heads ache, though it ought their hearts.' African Americans were being 'sold' by Loyalists who had no legal title to them 'if not hustled off to their Plantations', while slaveholders from the United States were 'daily pestering' Maxwell for the 'right to recover their Property where they can find it'. But he expressed sympathy for 'the poor slave [who] obtained his freedom by doing an Act, which all Nations protect: which is, most of these wretches deserted from their masters in the field' and 'our

¹⁶ Maxwell to Sydney, Nassau, 17 May 1784, CO23/25/104; Memorial of the Board of American Loyalists to George III, Nassau, 20 September 1785, CO5/561/5.

¹⁷ Memorial of the Board of American Loyalists to George III, Nassau, 20 September 1785, CO5/561/6.

Government gave them Instructions’, only for white Loyalists to ‘deceive them and pretend a bill of sale for them on *Landing*’.¹⁸

Shortly after Maxwell presented these observations, the Assembly began consideration of a new version of the Bahamian slave code. The resulting ‘Act for Governing Negroes, Mulattos, Mustees and Indians’ was largely a verbatim re-enactment of the 1767 law of the same name. The clauses addressing ‘the method of Trying Negroes... claims of Freedom’ empowered the colony’s Receiver General and Treasurer, along with two magistrates ‘at any time... to examine manumissions or passes of any Negroes... pretending to be free.’ If the latter could offer ‘no satisfactory proof of their being free’, or their documents were found to ‘be forged or otherwise insufficient’, they were ‘to be forthwith committed to the common Gaol’ prior to being auctioned for the benefit of the colonial treasury.¹⁹

That these provisions were primarily intended to address the ‘Confusion of Property’ arising from the ambiguous status of African Americans arriving in the Bahamas is strongly suggested by the Bahamian manumission records. Of 49 manumissions listed for 1783–4, 24 are ascribed to causes such as ‘Proclamation’, and certificates issued by General Archibald McArthur and Patrick Toinyn, respectively garrison commander and governor in East Florida, that clearly relate to African Americans who had been required to register or demonstrate their free status after coming to the Bahamas.²⁰ In several cases there are copies in the Bahamian Registry Office Books of free passes issued in New York and St. Augustine.²¹

The 1784 Act also reflected Bahamian law’s long established principle ‘that anyone who was unequivocally black... was presumed to be a slave unless proof to

¹⁸ *Journal of the General Assembly* (Nassau, 1912), 10 May 1784, 19–20; Governor’s speech to the Council and Assembly, 10 May 1784, CO23/25/197 (emphasis in original).

¹⁹ *Journal of the General Assembly*, 20 May 1784, 27; ‘An Act for Governing Negroes, Mulattoes, Mustees and Indians and for suspending several Acts herein mentioned’, 24 Geo. III, 7 July 1784, CO23/29/5–13, quotations at 8; ‘Act for the Governing of Negroes, Mulattoes and Indians’, 1767, in Cash et al., eds., *Sources of Bahamian History*, 185–9.

²⁰ ‘Register of Freed Slaves Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century’, BDA; ‘Negro Freedoms’, in ‘Executive Council Minutes’, microfilm (cited hereafter as ‘Negro Freedoms’), BDA.

²¹ See for instance the free passes issued to: Tyrone, dated New York, 6 October 1783, RGD, Registry Office Book O, f. 54; Amos, Judy and family, issued by McArthur and Toinyn, Saint Augustine, 7 & 12 August 1785, RGD, Registry Office Book M, f. 157; Nanny, issued by McArthur and endorsed by Toinyn, Saint Augustine, 5 August 1785, RGD, Registry Office Book M, f. 147.

the contrary was available.’²² Insofar as the burden of proof lay very much with non-whites to provide clear evidence of their freedom, the new law might very well function, as the Loyalists charged, to deny African Americans the benefit of the often ambiguous entitlements to liberty offered during the American Revolution.

But a great deal depended on the attitude of those responsible for considering such claims. In this respect, Loyalist slaveholders had good reason to bemoan the absence of ‘that inestimable right’, a jury of freeholders. The views of Receiver General George Barry echoed those of Maxwell. In 1786 he wrote of his ‘great Pain of Mind’ at ‘every day see[ing] the Negroes, who came here from America, with the British General’s Free Passes, treated with unheard of cruelty, by *Men* who call themselves *Loyalists*.’ According to Barry, in spite of ‘Promises of Freedom and the King’s Protection’, émigré African Americans were ‘every day stolen away.’²³

These allegations of re-enslavement were later repeated by John Matson, Chief Justice of the Bahamas from 1787. He claimed that a great deal of Loyalist ‘Property consisted in Negroes, many of whom had been manumitted by General Officers in America’. Moreover, African Americans who had been ‘deluded under false Ideas of Liberty to leave America, and to bind themselves for one or two years, were now claimed as the absolute Property of their Masters,’ sometimes on the basis of ‘forged or illegal Bills of Sale and letters of Attorney’.²⁴

Matson is certainly a questionable witness; he was later described, rather like Maxwell, as a ‘knave’, who had come to the islands ‘fill’d with prejudices and determined... to *crush* the Loyalists’.²⁵ Documentary traces of this kind of illicit re-enslavement are unsurprisingly sparse and fragmented. Nonetheless, there is detailed evidence for a few individual cases.

²² Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:129; on the wider currency of the presumption that African ancestry was synonymous with enslaved status see Jordan, *White Over Black*, 44–98; Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 295–337; Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 77–140; Blackburn, *Making*, 12–16, 258–61, 264–6; Gordon K. Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought: The historical evolution of Caribbean society in its ideological aspects, 1492–1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004 edn.), 95–7.

²³ Barry to Stokes, Nassau, 30 June 1786, CO23/26/225 (Barry’s emphasis). A native of Barbados, Barry was a himself Loyalist, who had left Georgia in 1776, and first settled in the Bahamas in 1778. See Sabine, *Biographical Sketches*, 46; Coke, *Royal Commission*, 208.

²⁴ ‘An Account of the present Situation of Affairs in the Bahama Islands’, c. 1788, CO23/28/150; for the provenance of this document see Matson to Stephens, 15 November 1788, CO23/28/133–4.

²⁵ Wylly to Stokes, Rye, Sussex, 10 July 1789, CO23/29/227; Wylly to Stokes, Rye, Sussex, 6 July 1789, CO23/29/220 (Wylly’s emphasis).

After the death of their owner, James Scriven, early in the Revolutionary War, Agar and her husband Sambo had agreed to work on the plantation of Georgia Loyalist Isaac Baillou in return for ‘their victuals and clothing.’ The couple accompanied Baillou to St. Augustine at the end of the war, but Sambo left for the Bahamas at the end of 1784. The following August Baillou, who by this time had established himself as a planter at Refugee Hill in the interior of New Providence, offered a reward for Sambo’s capture in the *Bahama Gazette*. The runaway advertisement notes that Sambo was ‘well known by the Negroes as a Baptist Preacher, calls himself a Freeman, and is often seen in Nassau.’ Sambo was eventually arrested in March 1790, and in the subsequent hearing, the Receiver General would find that Baillou had ‘not shown the least authority that can justify him in detaining’ either Sambo or Agar, who had remained in the Loyalist’s possession during her husband’s absence.²⁶

Unsurprisingly, Bahamian runaway slave advertisements did not usually advertise fugitives’ claims to freedom, but there are a few noteworthy instances where this happened. In May 1791, a Z. Allen advertised the flight from his plantation on Great Exuma (an island first settled by Loyalist émigrés) of ‘John, a fellow extremely artful and well known in Providence by the Appellation of *Free John*, and Sue his Wife, a very dark Mulatto.’ Sue may have been the Sue Allen who was freed by a ‘Certificate of Justices’ in the same year.²⁷ A \$15 reward was offered in 1789 for ‘a Negro Wench named Nancy’, who had ‘worked about Town these two Years past, under the name of *Free Nancy*.’ Seven years later, John Ferguson promised ‘a handsome reward... to whoever apprehends’ another Nancy, who was ‘well known among the “free crew” that came from the Carolinas, by some of whom she is supposed harboured.’²⁸

There is also a range of evidence that gives some credence to Matson’s charge that African Americans who had been ‘prevailed upon to bind themselves for one or two years’ were subsequently ‘claimed as the absolute Property of their Masters.’

²⁶ *Bahama Gazette*, 6 August 1785; ‘Register of Freed Slaves Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century’, BDA, f. 29; ‘Negro Freedoms’, BDA, f. 8; Parrish, ‘Records’, 116–7. On Sambo Scriven’s subsequent career as pastor of Nassau’s first Baptist chapel, see Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:330.

²⁷ *Bahama Gazette*, 10 May 1791 (emphasis in original); ‘Register of Freed Slaves Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century’, BDA, f. 2.

²⁸ *Bahama Gazette*, February 1789 (emphasis in original); *Bahama Gazette*, July 1796, in Cash et al., eds., *Sources of Bahamian History*, 195.

Loyalists in Nova Scotia certainly re-enslaved Southern black veterans of the Revolutionary War in this manner, and it is possible that indentured servitude in the Bahamas was a Loyalist innovation. There is apparently no record of the practice prior to 1783, nor is it mentioned in the 1784 slave code.²⁹ The free blacks who came to Abaco from New York in 1783 were listed in the ‘Book of Negroes against the ‘names of persons in whose possession they now are.’ In at least one documented instance, these people were later forced to buy back their freedom.³⁰

There are also cases where the Receiver General and magistrates certified the freedom of people who were held on the basis of fraudulent or expired indentures.³¹ Perhaps the most interesting of these is the case of the ‘Negro Man’ Tom Patrick, who claimed in 1786 to have ‘signed an Indenture to serve Charles Whitehead two years, which time [had] expired.’ At Patrick’s trial, Whitehead produced an indenture lasting seven years, witnessed by Isaiah Wallace. However, Thomas Willet testified that Wallace had subsequently ‘refused to prove the Identity of the said Indenture for Seven Years’, declaring ‘that he did sign a paper, as a witness, at the request of Charles Whitehead, but that Tom Patrick was not present at the time.’ Another deponent, Cornelius Blanchard, reported that ‘he saw an Indenture signed by Tom Patrick for two years only... and that the Indenture now produced for seven years service, he never saw until this day.’ William Wilcocks concurred that ‘he saw, on... Abaco, Tom’s Indenture to... Whitehead, dated in New York, and that it was only for two years.’ Wilcocks added that he also ‘saw Tom’s free pass; and that Tom complained... of Whitehead’s endeavouring to force him to deliver up the same with his Indenture for two years.’ The Court found in Patrick’s favour, and he would eventually receive a new free pass in 1787.³² Tom Patrick’s circumstances may have been fortunate, both in belonging to the group of New York émigrés whose freedom was a matter of established record, and in the willingness of whites to support his claim in court. But his case illustrates the vulnerability of indentured black people to the machinations of unscrupulous employers. Especially if illiterate, the former would

²⁹ Troxler, ‘Hidden from History’, 43–8; Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 24.

³⁰ ‘Book of Negroes’, British Headquarters Papers #10427, f. 83, in Riley, *Homeward Bound*, Appendix D, 266–9; Certificate of Release from Indenture, Abaco, 26 April 1784, RGD, Registry Office Book M, f. 338.

³¹ See for instance the trials of Mary Robinson, Nassau, 6 June 1786, and James Brown, Nassau, 13 May 1788, RGD, Registry Office Book M, f. 343; Book O, f. 7.

³² Trial of Tom Patrick, Nassau, 20 November 1786, RGD, Registry Office Book M, ff. 497–8.

face great difficulty in challenging the validity of documents like that presented by Whitehead, and presumably few blacks would be able to marshal the formidable array of supporting testimony from which Patrick benefited. For people who had lost, or simply never possessed documentation like Patrick's free pass, it would be still harder to satisfy the standard of proof demanded by the 1784 Act.

That legislation also called upon the governor to issue proclamations 'commanding all Free Negroes... or that call themselves Free, to... appear before the Receiver General... that the validity of his or her Claim of Freedom may be legally tried.'³³ There is no indication that such a proclamation was actually made in 1784, when a legal assessment of the status of all free people of colour in the Bahamas was scarcely feasible in view of the colonial government's limited and overstretched resources. While Maxwell was preoccupied by the immediate problems occasioned by the migration and the émigrés' 'riotous proceedings', Barry was fighting a largely losing battle simply to collect the colonial taxes.³⁴

Nonetheless, for Loyalist slaveholders, the prospect of such a general investigation was alarming in direct proportion to the uncertainty and tenuousness of their claims over the African Americans uprooted by the years of war and revolution. It was surely this issue, above all, that informed the Loyalists' staunch opposition to Maxwell, and their uncompromising insistence that 'Under his Government, they can never submit to live.' But whatever Maxwell's concern for the plight of the 'poor slave' returned to bondage in the Bahamas, he had no stomach for a protracted confrontation over this or any other issue. Exhausted by the Loyalists' intransigent opposition to his authority, Maxwell left the Bahamas, never to return, in March 1785. In that year, the colonial authorities apparently accepted the claim to freedom of just one black émigré.³⁵

Lieutenant Governor James Powell, himself a Loyalist, took office professing his intention to unite Bahamians 'in one common interest, that of Encouraging

³³ 'An Act for Governing Negroes, Mulattoes, Mustees and Indians and for suspending several Acts herein mentioned', 24 Geo. III, 7 July 1784, CO23/29/8.

³⁴ Proclamation by Maxwell, 18 May 1784, CO23/25/110; Barry to Stokes, Nassau, 15 January 1786, CO23/26/209.

³⁵ Memorial of the Board of American Loyalists to George III, Nassau, 20 September 1785, CO5/561/5; *Bahama Gazette*, 26 March 1785; Trial of James Green, 15 February 1785, RGD, Registry Office Book N, ff. 291–2.

Industry'.³⁶ However, Maxwell's last act was to dissolve the Assembly, resulting in a sharp and acrimonious polarisation of colonial politics between factions explicitly identifying with Loyalist and conch interests; the *Bahama Gazette* reported that 'few Elections in England ever exhibited a keener struggle than what this did'.³⁷ Amid allegations of fraud and irregularity on both sides, the Loyalist candidates failed to gain control of the new legislature. They declined to take up their seats, declaring themselves to be unrepresented by 'the present rotten and unconstitutional majority in the House of Assembly' and not subject to its laws. Powell's condemnation of such actions, and above all his refusal to call new elections, were taken as clear proof that he had fallen 'under the influence of the despicable faction, to insult and oppress his Majesty's Faithful American Loyalists'.³⁸

The latter were now steeling themselves for 'united exertions, for firmness, for... an unalterable determination not to yield' in the face of 'our enemies – for such there are here'. Although professing that 'we will rejoice to see the Old Settlers emancipated from that state of thralldom in which they have been held', Loyalists also belligerently warned that anyone opposing them 'threatens to light up a torch of civil contest, which years may not extinguish'.³⁹

Overt manifestations of political conflict actually subsided somewhat over the following years, especially under the administration of John Brown, longstanding president of the Council, who served as acting governor after Powell's death early in 1786. This may have been because neither Brown or Powell showed any inclination to engage with the thorny issue of re-enslavement. When John Cruden, claiming to be acting under the auspices of his wartime position as commissioner of sequestered estates in the Southern colonies, called upon 'all persons holding Negroes the property of the Inhabitants of the Southern States of America, that have either made their escape, or who have been brought away clandestinely' to furnish him with a list of

³⁶ Memorandum from Powell, Nassau, 7 March 1785, CO23/26/190. Born in Britain, Powell had been a merchant and member of the Council in Georgia until 1775; see Sabine, *Biographical Sketches*, 699.

³⁷ *Bahama Gazette*, 11 December 1784; cf. the description of the election in Kelly, *Eighteenth Century-Seaman*, 112.

³⁸ Resolutions of Loyalist General Meeting, 9 May 1785, *Bahama Gazette*, 14 May 1785; 'An American Loyalist', *Bahama Gazette*, 2 April 1785; Report of meeting of the Committee of American Loyalists, 8 June 1785, *Bahama Gazette*, 11 June 1785; Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 168–9; Wylly, *Short Account*, 11–13.

³⁹ 'A Georgia Loyalist', *Bahama Gazette*, 23 April 1785; 'An American Loyalist', *Bahama Gazette*, 2 April 1785.

such African Americans in the Bahamas, he apparently received predictably short shrift.⁴⁰ By this point, secure possession of re-enslaved black émigrés had been rendered all the more important to Loyalist slaveholders by the terms for grants of crown land announced in 1785. Henceforth, ‘heads of families’ were entitled to twenty acres for every ‘white and black man, woman or child, of which such family shall consist’.⁴¹

Nonetheless, William Wylly’s retrospective claim that ‘*Party dissensions died away*’ in this period, often uncritically echoed in Bahamian historiography, is some way from the truth.⁴² The events of 1784–5 were only the first phase of a protracted struggle to establish ‘regular, energetic, and stable government’ in the Bahamas.⁴³ As we will see in chapter four, it was politically expedient for Wylly, writing in 1789, to dissociate the initial phase of that struggle from the ongoing efforts to secure the quiescence of both governor and legislature to the interests of the incipient plantocratic elite for which he was a leading spokesman. By then, the renewed ‘*Party dissensions*’ revolved quite explicitly around the issue of re-enslavement.

⁴⁰ *Bahama Gazette*, 14 January 1786.

⁴¹ Proclamation by Powell, 5 September 1785, *Bahama Gazette*, 10 September 1785; in Nova Scotia, East Florida Loyalists also claimed ownership of black émigrés to increase their headright entitlements: see Troxler, ‘Hidden from History’, 47.

⁴² Wylly, *Short Account*, 14 (Wylly’s emphasis); cf. Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 170; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:191.

⁴³ Memorial of the Board of American Loyalists to George III, Nassau, 20 September 1785, CO5/561/4.

II: Building a Slave Society: Cotton and Compromise on the Out Islands

Establishing a plantation economy was central to Loyalist designs for making the Bahamas a more ‘respectable’ place of settlement. For the émigré slaveholders, undertaking ‘to cultivate and improve’ the land was ‘necessary, to render these Islands serviceable to Great Britain, or beneficial to their inhabitants’, and was also the surest route to renewed ‘participation in the enjoyments, of a polished and cultivated society, and of the luxuries of modern refinement’.⁴⁴ These assumptions reflected the more general discourse of agricultural ‘improvement’ that informed British conceptions of empire, but also a more specifically Southern ‘conviction that slavery laid a path to a modern, commercial economy’. Plantation agriculture was a tried and proven method of disciplining and profitably exploiting enslaved labour. The wealth generated by export staples would enrich the planters and fuel further expansion, raising slavery and slaveholders to a position of overwhelming economic pre-eminence and facilitating attainment of a corresponding social and political hegemony.⁴⁵

The Loyalist migration was the catalyst for efforts to develop a Bahamian version of such an economy through the following decades. Unfortunately, in the almost total absence of detailed plantation records, this process is known largely through scattered anecdotal testimony and patchy quantitative sources. Evidence for the formative years of the plantation system in the 1780s is notably sparse. Inevitably, therefore, this critical phase has to be reconstructed and analysed in somewhat generalised and tentative terms, drawing in part on inferences and analogies drawn from later sources and studies of plantation slavery in other places.

The transition to plantation slave societies in the Americas ‘generally turned upon the discovery of some commodity... that could command an international market’. However, the peculiar circumstances of the Loyalist migration meant that the Bahamian experience was closer to that of the initial development of the Southern lowcountry at the end of the seventeenth century, when ‘Carolina settlers... had not even bothered to wait until they had a staple crop requiring chattel slavery; they

⁴⁴ Memorial of the Board of American Loyalists to George III, Nassau, September 1785, CO5/561/7, 4.

⁴⁵ Chaplin, *Anxious Pursuit*, 7; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 8–10. On the relationship between British notions of agriculture and empire see Richard Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, imperial Britain, and the ‘improvement’ of the world* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

simply brought in substantial numbers of African slaves and expected a suitable crop to materialize.’⁴⁶

Within a few years of their arrival, the émigrés generally identified ‘the Culture of Cotton’ as the crop that ‘will in all human probability answer the wishes of the Planter’. Thereafter, it would be many years before anyone in the Bahamas questioned the view that ‘their most valuable production is cotton’.⁴⁷ But this consensus was not immediately so obvious as hindsight can make it seem, and nor did it emerge overnight. Although there were already large numbers of Loyalists from East Florida in the Bahamas by the beginning of 1784, the first significant cotton crop for export was not planted until the following spring.⁴⁸ At this point, the Loyalists were ‘entire novices’ in the cultivation of cotton, which only began its rapid ascent to the status of the American South’s primary staple from the 1790s.⁴⁹ Nor, at first, did cotton seem to be their only option: the ‘soil and climate’ of the Bahamas were repeatedly said to be ‘well calculated to produce’ a wide range of crops. One observer described ‘Indigo growing on the Island of Providence as fine as I ever saw in America’, and Lieutenant Governor Powell reported in 1785 that ‘the Tobacco plant grows Luxuriant and will it’s thought richly reward the Planters pains’.⁵⁰

There is little specific evidence for the decisions of individual planters not to pursue these more familiar Southern staples. But it is possible to discern how a range of more general factors may have converged to make cotton seem the most plausible prospect of success. Notwithstanding the émigrés’ enthusiasm for planting, they professed themselves ‘unable to find persons of tried and undoubted experience to direct them’ in a colony where it was ‘surprising how *ignorant* the people here are with respect to the Soil of the many Islands that surround them’. However, cotton was

⁴⁶ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 9; Chaplin, *Anxious Pursuit*, 6.

⁴⁷ Committee of Correspondence to Anthony Stokes, Nassau, 9 March 1786, CO23/26/207; Wylly, *Short Account*, 3.

⁴⁸ William Walker to Gen. Lincoln, Nassau, 28 January, 10 February 1784, CO23/26/46; Wylly, *Short Account*, 3; see also ‘Report of the Committee appointed to take into consideration the state of the Bahama Islands’, 28 April 1789, CO23/29/173–4; *Bahama Gazette*, 11 April 1789.

⁴⁹ ‘Address and Memorial of the British Merchants lately Settled in this Country’, Nassau, 16 April 1785, CO37/23/5; Chaplin, *Anxious Pursuit*, 297.

⁵⁰ Resolutions of the ‘General Meeting’ of ‘American Loyalists’, Nassau, 29 July 1784, in *South Carolina Gazette and Public Advertiser*, 15 September 1784; ‘Account of the principal islands’, c. February 1784, Add. MSS 38375, f. 125; Memorandum from Powell, Nassau, 7 March 1785, CO23/26/190; cf. ‘Extract of a Letter from an American Loyalist, now settled as New Providence’, n.d. [after 18 May 1784], CO23/26/163.

certainly already grown on a modest scale in the Bahamas, and there were alluring, if perhaps apocryphal, reports of successful commercial cultivation a few years earlier. Thus, with Loyalists in the Bahamas uncertain as to ‘whether they are at all capable of affording any staple articles’, cotton could well have seemed like the least unsafe bet.⁵¹

Moreover, the burgeoning British textile industry seemed to offer cotton a bright future as a lucrative export crop. During the 1780s, ministers hoped that promoting West Indian production would make the empire self-sufficient in cotton, an aim that Lord North had in mind when suggesting the Bahamas as a possible destination for Loyalists as early as 1783.⁵²

These issues have received most attention when historians have sought to account for the Loyalists’ focus on cotton.⁵³ But the slave plantation was as much a mode of labour organisation as a form of agriculture and commerce, and other considerations emerge when the rapid growth of Bahamian cotton production is considered from this perspective. Establishing a new plantation economy in an unfamiliar location was always a delicate manoeuvre in the ongoing process of negotiation and contestation between masters and enslaved workers, a moment when ‘renegotiating the rules of the game put everything at risk.’⁵⁴ This was all the more so in the Bahamas, where the process was intimately bound up with the drive to re-enslavement. Subjecting black émigrés to the rigorous routine of plantation labour at once represented both a means and the ultimate end of confirming that such people were indeed ‘undoubted property’. But by the same token, such an undertaking ran directly counter to black aspirations fuelled by the experience of slavery’s disruption during the American Revolution.

The plantation regimen of the lower South had been severely compromised by the effects of the Revolutionary War. Especially during the turbulent period of British occupation from 1778, slaves were said to be ‘ungovernable’, ‘quite their own

⁵¹ ‘Address and Memorial of the British Merchants lately Settled in this Country’, Nassau, 16 April 1785, CO37/23/5; ‘Extract of a Letter from Lewis Johns[t]on Esq, to Lt Gov Graham’, New Providence, July 1783, CO23/26/27 (emphasis in original); see also the letter from ‘A Loyalist’, *Bahama Gazette*, 12 February 1785. On pre-Loyalist cotton production see p. 95 above.

⁵² Drescher, *Econocide*, 56–8; Lord North’s representation to the Committee of Council for Plantation Affairs, 17 September 1783, Chalmers Papers, JCBL, reel 1.

⁵³ See for instance Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 9–12; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:192, 196–7.

⁵⁴ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 11.

masters', and 'under little or no Subjection to Overseers'.⁵⁵ If anything, relocation into the chaotic situation prevailing in post-war East Florida only exacerbated the breakdown of labour discipline, not least among those African Americans convinced of their entitlement to freedom. Such people were hardly promising candidates for a plantation workforce in the Bahamas, where the organisation and infrastructure of intensive commercial agriculture had to be improvised largely from scratch in less than propitious conditions.

During the mid-1780s, Georgia Loyalist Colonel John Douglas, surveying the then uninhabited Crooked Island along with 'two or three negroes', found himself 'for some days totally alone in the wilderness', with no means of getting off the island. Many years later, Douglas would insist that he had 'felt... not the least apprehension for the fidelity of his slaves, who must have been conscious of his helpless situation'. For Daniel McKinnen, who recorded Douglas's reminiscences, this story was evidence both of 'the courage and humanity of the master', and of how 'that superiority of faculties which the negro perceives in the white man overcomes every thought of independence'.⁵⁶ But this anecdote also provides a stark illustration of the precarious position of whites on the hitherto 'unsettled and unknown' Out Islands, where population ratios were comparable to those of the most monocultural sugar islands. In such circumstances, where direct coercion was potentially explosive, slaveholders surely had little choice in favouring a more ostensibly consensual approach to the organisation of production wherever possible.⁵⁷

In this respect, it is notable that cotton *was* a familiar crop to lowcountry African-Americans. It had always been a mainstay of their provision grounds as a means of supplementing masters' sparse issues of clothing. During the American Revolution, moreover, cotton 'briefly characterized slaves' wartime liberation from planters' full authority' as the breakdown of labour discipline in the lower South facilitated a temporary collapse in staple production in favour of the expansion of the

⁵⁵ Eliza Pinckney, 25 September 1780, and William Bull to Lord Hillsborough, 22 March 1781, quoted in Philip D. Morgan, 'Black Society in the Lowcountry 1760–1810', in Ira Berlin & Ronald Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1983), 110; William Ancram to James Edward Colleton, 14 July 1780, quoted in Chaplin, *Anxious Pursuit*, 216.

⁵⁶ McKinnen, *Tour*, 169–70. On Douglas see Feldman, ed., *Last Days*, 52. For the dating of the settlement of Crooked Island see pp. 132–3 below.

⁵⁷ On Exuma, there were 638 'coloured' inhabitants and 66 whites at the end of 1785; on Cat Island the proportion was 305 to 59. See 'Bahama Islands', [1785], Add. MSS 38346, f. 56.

slaves' economy. Where plantations continued to function as such, they frequently did so by shifting towards a subsistence economy. Planters found that enslaved workers who could not be induced to produce rice and indigo would grow food and cotton, crops raised largely for the slaves' own use and on their own terms.⁵⁸

The techniques – or lack of them – employed in the early years of the Bahamian cotton economy were later recognised by planters to have been seriously flawed. Clearing ground by burning damaged the thin topsoil, exacerbating the exhaustive effects of failing to rest land by systematic fallowing and field rotation. Neglecting to destroy old plants and unwanted seed encouraged the spread of insect pests that could devastate an entire crop unless immediately dealt with. These mistakes may well have reflected the initial inexperience, not to say incompetence, of the planters themselves. But if such methods were inappropriate for commercial planting, they were perfectly reasonable in the context of the kind of small-scale, shifting cultivation familiar to both slaves' provision grounds and the pre- (and post-) Loyalist Bahamas.⁵⁹ Thus, in opting for cotton cultivation, the Loyalists may well have been in part deferring to the experience and perhaps the preferences of black émigrés. This view is all the more credible in light of the extent to which the plantation system that emerged in the Bahamas demonstrably did devolve a substantial degree of personal autonomy and control over production to the enslaved workers.

The principal mode of labour organisation adopted in the Bahamian cotton economy was the task system. Groups of two to four workers were allotted a daily labour requirement, or 'task', reckoned in terms of an area of land to be worked; by the nineteenth century, the daily task unit in the Bahamas seems to have been more or less standardised at a quarter of an acre, 'usually marked out by permanent stations in

⁵⁸ Chaplin, *Anxious Pursuit*, 211–20, quotation at 219; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 301–2.

⁵⁹ The early techniques of Bahamian cotton cultivation are known principally through planters' later criticism of them: see for instance 'Cotton Planting', *Bahama Gazette*, 22 April, 2–6 May, 1800; 'Queries on the Culture of Cotton' and answers by planters, enclosure in Dowdeswell to Portland, 22 May 1800, CO23/39/167–208; *Communications on Different Subjects, Addressed to the Bahama Agricultural Society* (Nassau, 1802), 7–9. 'Slash-and-burn' methods still characterise Bahamian subsistence cultivation; see Saunders, 'Slave Life, Slave Society and Cotton Production', 334; Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 93.

every field'. When their task was completed, slaves' time was, in the words of a Long Island plantation overseer, 'totally their own to due what they please'.⁶⁰

The task system was probably directly carried over to the Bahamas by the émigrés from the Southern lowcountry, where task working had become a deeply-embedded customary norm in plantation agriculture by the mid-eighteenth century. In 1823, Bahamian whites would claim that 'the system of task-work' had 'been, within the memory of the oldest of us, the uniform system of our planters.'⁶¹ This was something of an exaggeration, insofar as tasking is best understood as representing one end of a continuum of plantation labour systems.⁶² At times 'when it would hardly be possible to assign set tasks', such as when planting seed cotton and picking the finished crop, Bahamian slaves often worked along lines closer to the gang labour organisation more commonly employed by cotton planters in North America and the Caribbean. Nonetheless, the evidence available from the supposedly peak years of Bahamian cotton production before 1800 consistently indicates that tasking was considered the normal method to be used whenever possible in this period, when planters routinely reckoned the size of their workforce in terms of the number of 'taskable hands'.⁶³

In the lower South, the task system had long proved highly effective as a means of organising the gruelling but relatively straightforward routine of rice culture. For planters inclined to partial absenteeism, it facilitated the exaction of a prescribed

⁶⁰ Wylly to Zachary Macaulay, 15 April 1812, in George Chalmers, *Proofs and Demonstrations how much the projected Registry of Colonial Negroes is unfounded and uncalled for...* (London, 1816), 52; James Ledekin to John Holland, Long Island, 12 May 1796, DCRO, D37 M/H 20/14.

⁶¹ *Official Letter*, 41. On the lowcountry task system see Morgan, 'Work and Culture', 563–99. The derivation of the Bahamian task system from North America, although based more on eminently plausible inference than hard evidence, is generally accepted: see for instance Saunders, 'Slave Life, Slave Society and Cotton Production', 337; Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 15, 49–50.

⁶² On this point see Peter D. Coclanis, 'How the Low Country was Taken to Task: Slave-labor organization in coastal South Carolina and Georgia', in Robert Louis Paquette & Louis A. Ferleger, eds., *Slavery, Secession, and Southern History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 61–2; Philip D. Morgan, 'Task and Gang Systems: The organization of labor on New World plantations', in Innes, ed., *Work and Labor*, 190–91.

⁶³ Wylly to Macaulay, 15 April 1812, in Chalmers, *Proofs and Demonstrations*, 52; for eighteenth-century tasking see for instance William Gordon to Porteus, 7 September 1792, Fulham Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, American Colonial Section, vol. XV, f. 92; 'On the Culture of Cotton', *Bahama Gazette*, 15 January 1790; Denys Rolle to Henry Dundas, n.d. [received 28 August 1793], CO23/32/261–3; Advertisement by Thomas Forbes, *Bahama Gazette*, 16 November 1790; Journals of the House of Assembly, 14 December 1795, CO23/34/224.

and measurable quantity of labour from slaves working with limited supervision.⁶⁴ A similarly arms-length management style was common in the Bahamas, where the owners of many of the largest plantations spent much of their time in Nassau pursuing parallel careers as merchants, lawyers, politicians and government officials. Absenteeism was sufficiently rife for residents of Long Island to petition the legislature for ‘a Law to oblige proprietors of plantations under cultivation on which they do not actually reside to keep at least one white person thereon’. One observer stated explicitly that ‘the reason they set tasks in the Bahamas to the Negroes is that there are so few in a gang in these Islands that it is not worth a white man’s expence of time to be constantly overlooking them’.⁶⁵

Such attitudes were perhaps informed by the common assumptions that ‘the business of a cotton planter’ was ‘very simple and easy’, and that ‘no field labour in any country where the plough is not in use, can possibly be lighter than that of our plantations’.⁶⁶ But while cotton was certainly a less physically demanding crop than sugar or rice, many cotton planters elsewhere considered tasking an inefficient system that afforded slaves too much autonomy. Most found that the simple, repetitive operations involved in cotton cultivation and the need for careful attention in the weeding and pruning stages were better suited to the regimentation and close scrutiny facilitated by gang labour organisation.⁶⁷

But even when they were present, Bahamian masters and overseers could seem remarkably unconcerned with the detailed workings of their estates. Visiting his Andros plantation ‘to see what appearance of a Crop of Cotton my fields afforded, but meeting nothing very pleasing in that way’, James Brisbane ‘took the opportunity of retirement’ to compose a lengthy essay on trigonometry for the *Bahama Gazette*. James Ledekin, in a 1,200 word letter home to England describing his unlikely new

⁶⁴ Morgan, ‘Work and Culture’, 567–9; Coclanis, ‘Taken to Task’, 67; Chaplin, *Anxious Pursuit*, 85–7.

⁶⁵ ‘Petition from the inhabitants of Long Island’, *Votes of the Honourable House of Assembly of the Bahama Islands* (Nassau, 1796), 9 November 1795, 35; Gordon to Porteus, 7 September 1792, Fulham Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, American Colonial Section, vol. XV, f. 92.

⁶⁶ ‘Address and Memorial of the British Merchants lately Settled in this Country’, Nassau, 16 April 1785, CO37/23/5; Wylly to Macaulay, 15 April 1812, in Chalmers, *Proofs and Demonstrations*, 52.

⁶⁷ Morgan, ‘Work and Culture’, 576; Morgan, ‘Black Society in the Lowcountry’, 107; Chaplin, *Anxious Pursuit*, 220–26; Joseph P. Reidy, ‘Obligation and Right: Patterns of labor, subsistence, and exchange in the cotton belt of Georgia, 1790–1860’, in Berlin & Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture*, 139–41, 146–7; Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A design for mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1982), 74–5; Robert William Fogel & Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The economics of American Negro slavery* (New York: Norton, 1989 edn.), 203–5.

career as overseer of a Long Island cotton plantation, managed to include only a single sentence on his charges' work 'in Felling wood Cutting down Cotton and weeding', which was 'generally done by the Task'.⁶⁸

As well as affording slaves a measure of freedom to work at their own pace without close supervision, the task system allowed them independence to dispose of a substantial portion of their labour and time for their own benefit. Historians have tended to see the emergence of a substantial proto-peasant slaves' economy in the Bahamas as a principally nineteenth-century phenomenon, occurring in tandem with the failure of the cotton industry.⁶⁹ However, the salient characteristics of that economy are all clearly in evidence in the previous century. Enslaved cotton workers are described as routinely completing their daily tasks 'by three often before two o'clock in the afternoon'. It was said to be customary for them to receive 'small portions of land' for their own use in 1788. The slaves on the Long Island plantation managed by Ledekin in the 1790s had 'ground allow'd them to raise what Roots and vegetables they please and the liberty of raising Hogs and poultry as many as they please'.⁷⁰ As well as cultivating their provision grounds, enslaved rural workers were able to engage in traditional Bahamian commoning practises such as gathering wild fruit and vegetables, woodcutting, fishing, turtling and hunting; they were said to display 'much ingenuity' in the pursuit of alligators, a quarry that 'required considerable address and some courage to destroy'.⁷¹

Earlier testimony endorses William Wylly's remark of 1815 that it was proverbial in the Bahamas that "*No Negro ever eats his own food or kills his own pig*" – they sell them all'. Denys Rolle observed in 1793 that his slaves at Exuma 'tilled and rais'd much Corn for sale', and spoke of their 'Property' or 'Riches gain'd by Extra Labour and Stock'. Likewise the workers on Ledekin's plantation were 'well stock'd' with 'Hogs and poultry', and were able to 'sell a great many and purchase Sugar, Tea, Rum &c.' In 1798, Ledekin's employers supplied him with over £200

⁶⁸ Letter from James Brisbane, Andros, 20 February 1791, *Bahama Gazette*, 1 April 1791; Ledekin to Holland, Long Island, 12 May 1796, DCRO, D37 M/H 20/14.

⁶⁹ See especially Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 47–55, but cf. Saunders, 'Slave Life, Slave Society and Cotton Production', 342–3; Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, 227–31.

⁷⁰ Ledekin to Holland, Long Island, 12 May 1796, DCRO, D37 M/H 20/14; 'Answers to heads of Inquiry relative to Negroe Slaves in the Bahama Islands', enclosure in Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 30 July 1788, CO23/28/31.

⁷¹ Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:269–81, 289–95; Letter from 'A Planter', *Bahama Gazette*, 21 March 1794; McKinnen, *Tour*, 188.

worth of consumer goods, including several hundred pounds of sugar and tobacco and twenty gallons of rum and brandy as well as tableware, 'Muslin Neckerchiefs' and 'Hair Ribbons'.⁷²

Bahamian plantation slaves were able to market so much of their own produce because the slaves' economy was not expected to carry the principal weight of their subsistence needs. As in the lowcountry task system, slaveholders provided clothes and weekly allowances of corn or similar staple foods.⁷³ Of course, this was scarcely a difficulty in a region where rice was the primary export crop. It was another matter in a colony that had never produced enough food for its own consumption, and whose population more than doubled between 1784–6. In the immediate aftermath of the Loyalist migration, planters would have had little choice about supplying their slaves with provisions that were necessarily mainly imported.⁷⁴

As early as the end of 1785, it was claimed that 'most Planters are firmly persuaded that they will make all their own Provisions this Year'. However, although many Bahamian estates seem to have raised some food crops alongside cotton, the extent of the cotton economy's continuing reliance on imported food would be starkly illustrated when external supplies were disrupted in the 1790s.⁷⁵

For many planters the case for greater self-sufficiency was seemingly outweighed by 'a notion, that the produce of a field of cotton, would purchase three times as much corn, as the same field would if planted with corn'.⁷⁶ Yet West Indian and North American planters generally found that cotton's uneven seasonal labour requirements left the workforce sufficient time to also meet its own subsistence needs. Indeed, corn was particularly favoured because its flexible growth cycle could easily

⁷² Wylly to Macaulay, 15 April 1812, in Chalmers, *Proofs and Demonstrations*, 53 (emphasis in original); Rolle to Dundas, n.d. [received 28 August 1793], CO23/32/261–3; Ledekin to Holland, Long Island, 12 May 1796, DCRO, D37 M/H 20/14; Account of James Ledekin with Forbes Munro & co., RGD, loose sheet between Registry Office Book E², ff. 4–5.

⁷³ Morgan, 'Work and Culture', 586–7; 'Answers to heads of Inquiry relative to Negroe Slaves in the Bahama Islands', enclosure in Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 30 July 1788, CO23/28/31; Ledekin to Holland, Long Island, 12 May 1796, DCRO, D37 M/H 20/14. Slaveholders were legally obliged to provide both 'good, wholesome and sufficient provisions', and provision grounds by the Consolidated Slave Act of 1797, 37 Geo. III, c. 2, *Acts of Assembly of the Bahama Islands*, 3 vols. (Nassau, 1806), 1:95, § 2.

⁷⁴ Schoepf, *Travels*, 2:269–70; on the severe food shortages in 1784–6 see for instance Maxwell to Tonym, Nassau, 5 June 1784, CO23/25/128, 135–7; Committee of Correspondence to Stokes, Nassau, 9 March 1786, CO23/26/207.

⁷⁵ 'Bahama Islands' [1785], Add. MSS 38346, f. 57; see pp. 220–21 below.

⁷⁶ *Communications on Different Subjects*, 17.

accommodate the needs of the cotton harvest.⁷⁷ As we have seen, there is clear evidence of such a surplus labour capacity in Bahamian cotton production. But there, the task system placed it largely out of the planters' reach, facilitating its appropriation to the slaves' economy. Moreover, tasking's clear demarcation of what was labour for the masters and how much of it they were entitled to expect was probably an obstacle to efforts to shift the burden of subsistence to the provision grounds. If completion of the day's task represented a slave's obligation to the master, then the latter's reciprocal obligation was to provide the customary allowance of food. Whatever else slaves might do or not do during the day was a matter for 'their private concerns'.⁷⁸

None of this seemed to matter very much to slaveholders during the 1780s, when cotton seemed to be a runaway success. After the initial crop of 124 tons from 2,476 acres was picked in 1786, output and acreage nearly doubled over the next two years. By 1788, when the cotton frontier had reached hitherto 'totally uninhabited' Crooked Island and Grand Caicos, there were over 8,000 acres in cultivation. These two islands alone could boast around 7,000 acres of land 'actually under cultivation or cleared for it' by the early 1790s.⁷⁹ This breakneck expansion generated another sequence of migrations, both within and into the Bahamas. Around 1,200 of the non-white émigrés probably moved from New Providence and Abaco to the cotton producing Out Islands between the end of 1785 and June 1788.⁸⁰ In that year, the colony saw the first 'New Negroes Imported for sale' since the 1750s; almost 800 enslaved Africans were brought to the Bahamas by the end of the decade. In the same period, the availability of free land and reports of the bright prospects for cotton production induced further immigration by slaveholders. A group of 187 people from

⁷⁷ See Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial* (1806 edn.), 3:95; Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The rise and fall of American slavery* (New York: Norton, 1989), 161; Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, markets, and wealth in the nineteenth century* (New York: Norton, 1978), 57–62.

⁷⁸ McKinnen, *Tour*, 173.

⁷⁹ 'Report of the Committee appointed to take into consideration the state of the Bahama Islands', 28 April 1789, CO23/29/173; *Bahama Gazette*, 11 April 1789; 'The Memorial of the Subscribers Inhabitants and Planters on the Island of Grand Caicos', enclosure in Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 28 August 1792, CO23/31/147–8 (both quotations at 147); list of plantations on Crooked Island, 20 August 1791, CO23/31/228; see also pp. 107–8 above.

⁸⁰ The population tables for 1785 and 1788 that appear respectively in 'Bahama Islands', Add. MSS 38346, f. 56, and Wylly, *Short Account*, 7 show substantial decreases in the émigré non-white populations of New Providence and Abaco (for which Wylly noted 'Planters moving off'), and corresponding increases elsewhere, principally Long Island, Cat Island, Caicos and Crooked Island. Notably, these populations are described as 'New Coloured' inhabitants in the 1785 document, and as 'Slaves' by Wylly.

the Mosquito Shore, 'said to be extremely industrious, and perfectly skilled in the cultivation of cotton', arrived in 1787. Crooked Island was partly settled by planters relocating with their slaves from Grenada.⁸¹

By the end of the decade, planters were in no doubt that 'the Culture of Cotton presents a vast field for Increase and Improvement.' With the vice president of the Board of Trade confidently advising the House of Commons 'that the Bahama Islands promised, in a little time to be able to supply Great Britain with nearly all the cotton her manufactures might require,' it briefly seemed plausible to assert that the Bahamas 'must henceforth... be considered among the most important of our remaining Colonies'. For Loyalists, establishing 'the Culture of a Staple Commodity which promises... material Advantage, as well to the manufacturers as the trade & navigation of the mother Country', was a way of reaffirming both their British identity and their continuing value and significance to the empire.⁸²

Furthermore, cotton would become increasingly central to the émigré slaveholders' claims about the future of the Bahamas, and their own place in that future as the natural governing class. As one Loyalist petition for new elections starkly put it, the existing legislature had too many members who 'are no ways interested in Cotton Planting and they are therefore very unfit persons to make Laws for the Internal Government of this Colony', where cotton 'ultimately must become the staple'. In 1789 William Wylly elaborated that the Assembly contained only 'four (very inconsiderable) Planters', while 'the only Member of the Council, who has an Acre of Cotton, is an American Loyalist, and that he possesses nearly as many Slaves as all the rest of his Brother Counsellors put together'. Of course, 'from a legislature composed of such persons,' he concluded, 'it would be absurd to expect much wisdom, or any regular System of local law.'⁸³

⁸¹ 'Report of the Committee appointed to take into consideration the state of the Bahama Islands', 28 April 1789, CO23/29/173; Wilkie & Farnsworth, *Sampling Many Pots*, 42, Table 3.1; Brown to Sydney, Nassau, 3 October 1787, CO23/27/63; Petition of John Hanna, 14 March 1798, Force Papers, LC, Series 8A #11, f. 7; McKinnen, *Tour*, 176.

⁸² 'Report of the Committee appointed to take into consideration the state of the Bahama Islands', 28 April 1789, CO23/29/172; *Columbian Herald or the Patriotic Courier of North America*, 28 June 1787; Wylly, *Short Account*, 1; Petition for dissolution of the House of Assembly, New Providence, 2 January 1788, CO23/27/102.

⁸³ 'Memorial of the Inhabitants of Long Island', 1 January 1788, CO23/27/110; Wylly, *Short Account*, 19.

Such claims necessarily rested on the premise that cotton had been ‘a discovery left for the industry of the American Loyalists’. This assertion neatly encapsulated the émigrés’ contempt for the society and people to which they had come ‘in quest of new habitations’. But it also tidily elided the rather messy conjunction of multiple protagonists and influences that had shaped the origins and form of the cotton economy. For Loyalists looking both ‘to remake their fortunes’ and make the Bahamas a slave society, it had seemed imperative to establish a stable rhythm of plantation labour as quickly as possible. With the attitudes of Bahamians and African-American émigrés ranging from ambivalence to outright hostility, planters may well have had little choice in making concessions regarding their direct power over the daily life and labour of formally enslaved workers. Such an arrangement was easily arrived at because it largely took the form of a mode of labour organisation that already had the force of custom for both black and white émigrés. In large part, slaveholders accepted compromise because it seemed to be no more than business as usual for ‘the industry of the American Loyalists’.⁸⁴

It may not be entirely fortuitous that these defiant effusions of self-congratulation coincided with the first significant setback for the nascent plantation economy. Almost 400 tons of cotton had been expected from the crop planted in 1788, but by the following April, it seemed that nearly three quarters had been destroyed by ‘the ravages of a most destructive insect’, the chenille caterpillar. Although ‘bugs’ were henceforth a recurring hazard, output more than recovered the following year, and faith in cotton did not seriously falter until the end of the following decade.⁸⁵ In the meantime, the prevalence of this glib narrative of Loyalist agency made it all the harder for the planters to appreciate how far they had compromised their own interests by the terms of enslavement settled on while they remained ‘in a great measure in the dark’ about the nature and potential of cotton culture.⁸⁶ In contrast to American cotton

⁸⁴ Wylly, *Short Account*, 3; Memorial of the Board of American Loyalists to George III, Nassau, September 1785, CO5/561/3; Peters, ‘Loyalist Migration’, 140

⁸⁵ ‘Report of the Committee appointed to take into consideration the state of the Bahama Islands’, 28 April 1789, CO23/29/173–4; as it turned out, 189 tons of cotton were produced in 1789, and 495 the following year. See *Bahama Gazette*, 9 November 1790, 10 May 1791. Asked ‘Do you consider the soil and climate of these Islands are favourable to the culture of cotton?’ in 1800, the planters responding to the Assembly’s inquiry into the state of the cotton industry almost all answered positively. See CO23/39/167, 169, 176, 178, 199, 200, 204, 206.

⁸⁶ ‘Address and Memorial of the British Merchants lately Settled in this Country’, Nassau, 16 April 1785, CO37/23/5.

planters' nigh-on obsessive concern with every aspect of labour management, discussion of the relative merits of tasking and alternative forms of organisation by slaveholders in the Bahamas is virtually non-existent.⁸⁷ Eventually, it would become impossible to ignore how vulnerable the cotton economy was to fluctuations in the price and supply of the food that planters had failed to produce for themselves. But as we will see in chapter five, the continuing influence of revolutionary crisis in the Atlantic during the 1790s would leave planters worse placed than ever to contemplate renegotiating the compromises of the 1780s.

⁸⁷ Fogel & Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, 201–3; James O. Breedon, ed., *Advice Among Masters: The ideal in slave management in the Old South* (Westport: Greenwood, 1980), xvii–xxii; for the solitary criticism of the task system in the Bahamas, notably made by a Grenadine planter, see 'On the Culture of Cotton', *Bahama Gazette*, 15 January 1790.

III: Building a Black Society: Enclaves of Independence in Nassau

At least by comparison with the Out Islands, far more is known about black life in New Providence, and Nassau in particular, during the 1780s. There are serious limitations to the sources available: they tend to be anecdotal and somewhat fragmented; almost invariably, they were produced by white people, commonly those who enjoyed at least a degree of power and influence, and who were often slaveholders. There is surely a great deal that they provide only the faintest inklings of, if at all. Nonetheless, they do afford a distinct impression of the various ways in which non-white Bahamians managed to exercise a considerable measure of autonomy and independence within the context of the Loyalists' drive to establish a fully plantocratic society.

One aspect of this autonomy was economic. As we saw in chapter two, the system of self-hire known as 'working out on wages' was already well-established in Nassau by the 1780s. By the terms of this arrangement, enslaved people who paid a fixed 'wage' to their masters were effectively at liberty to fend for themselves economically. They could either sell their labour power to an employer, or seek to make a living on their own account.⁸⁸

Although there is no way of precisely quantifying the prevalence of self-hire relations in this (or any other) period, it is clear that there was no shortage of opportunities in both fields. The sudden growth of Nassau's population after 1783 increased the demand for all kinds of labour; there are references to slaves working as 'porters', bakers, shoemakers, barbers, and seamstresses, as well as many sailors and carpenters.⁸⁹

The 1784 Slave Code declared it illegal for non-whites to 'sell, Barter or carry about for sale or Barter... Wares or Merchandise of any kind Whatsoever'. Such items could be lawfully seized by any white person, while the possessor was liable for 'Twenty lashes on the bare back'. In practice, however, there were much-repeated, but apparently ineffectual complaints regarding 'the total neglect of enforcing the law

⁸⁸ See generally Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 17–23, 33–46.

⁸⁹ Presentments of the Grand Jurors, 30 August 1785, *Bahama Gazette*, 1 July 1785; runaway advertisements from the *Bahama Gazette* for: Daniel, 8 April 1786; Ben, 23 July 1785; Castalio, 12 February 1785; Sue, 17 November 1785. See also Roderick J. MacIntosh, 'Trades and Occupations of Runaway Slaves in the Bahamas 1784–1834', *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society*, 6:1 (October 1984), 7–14.

which prohibits the huckstering and retailing of dry goods, groceries, and liquors, by negroes and mulattoes'. Much of their merchandise was the produce of the rural slaves' economy in New Providence and beyond.⁹⁰ Throughout this period, slaves also continued to exercise the customary commoning rights upon 'lands not the Property of their Owners', foraging, hunting and cutting wood 'which they sell to raise Money to pay their Wages'.⁹¹

Such arrangements afforded urban black people the wherewithal to exercise a degree of control over other aspects of their lives. By the mid-1780s, an explicitly black suburb known as the 'Negro Town' had appeared on the southwest fringe of Nassau, in the area between the hospital on West Hill Street and 'Government House' on Mount Fitzwilliam a few hundred yards to the east. The timing and dynamics of this area's emergence are somewhat vague, not least because so little is known with any certainty about housing patterns before 1783, although it has been plausibly construed to be a result of 'the new pressures on space in downtown Nassau, and of the more rigorous concern for racial separation which came in with the American Loyalists'. Nonetheless, the 'Negro Town' offered its inhabitants a degree of 'residential independence' from slaveholders' interference in their daily lives and domestic arrangements.⁹²

Non-whites were also enthusiastic participants in a lively and extensive plebeian social culture revolving around drinking, gaming, and dancing.⁹³ As well as 'Taverns, Punch Houses and Grog Shops', Nassau boasted a 'great number of Tippling Houses, unlicensed Billiard and other Gaming Tables', and plenty of people engaged in 'retailing Spirituous Liquors Without a License... to Slaves not having tickets'.⁹⁴ One such individual was Timothy Cox, jr., a 'free Negro' who attracted the

⁹⁰ 'An Act for Governing Negroes, Mulattoes, Mustees and Indians and for suspending several Acts herein mentioned', 24 Geo. III, 7 July 1784, CO23/29/6; Presentments of the Grand Jurors, 30 August 1785, *Bahama Gazette*, 17 September 1785; cf. Presentments of the Grand Jury, 24 February 1789, BDA, S.C. 1/2; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 3 March 1795, BDA, S.C. 1/7.

⁹¹ *Bahama Gazette*, 19 March 1799.

⁹² Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:195; see also Gail Saunders & Donald Cartwright, *Historic Nassau* (Oxford: Macmillan, 1979), 21–3; Craton, 'Hopetown and Hard Bargain', 259. The term 'residential independence' is from Betty Wood, "'White Society' and the 'Informal' slave economies of Lowcountry Georgia, c. 1763–1830", *Slavery and Abolition*, 11:3 (December 1990), 324.

⁹³ On this subject see generally Johnson, 'Slave Life and Leisure', although this article concentrates on the nineteenth century.

⁹⁴ Presentments of the Grand Jury, 3 March 1795, BDA, S.C. 1/7; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 27 February 1794, *Bahama Gazette*, 4 March 1794; Extract of 'An Act to prevent Disorders being committed in... places where Strong Liquors are sold', 1763, *Bahama Gazette*, 19 November 1785.

ire of the Grand Jury for selling spirits, 'keeping a Public House' and 'entertaining Slaves and Free persons of colour at unseasonable Hours.' Non-whites prone to 'getting drunk and raising disturbances especially during the night time' could also enjoy the hospitality of Mary Bowman's 'disorderly home, frequented by negroes and seafaring people', or try their luck at the 'shuffle board' kept by Samuel Barnet.⁹⁵

'Riotous and tumultuous assemblies', conducted in the streets or at private homes, were the most public and dramatic expression of black sociability in Nassau. According to the Grand Jury, these 'frequent noisy and disorderly meetings of Negroes at unseasonable hours in the night' were a cause of 'the great annoyance and disturbance of the Inhabitants.'⁹⁶ As with so many of the Jurors' longstanding grievances, these practices continued unabated, and if anything seem to have grown more elaborate over time. By 1795, 'Negro and Mulatto Dances' were being 'held almost every Night in this Town', involving 'people of Colour of all conditions'. As well as entailing supposedly extravagant spending 'for the support of Dress and other Expences' involved, masters feared that such events led slaves to jeopardise 'their health by sitting up late and intemperance of every kind.'⁹⁷

Moreover, many non-white Bahamians could lay some claim to a degree of personal free status within the context of the slave regime. Unfortunately, the evidence for these people is, if anything, even patchier than that for the enslaved. They seem to have been concentrated on New Providence, although there were also substantial numbers of free non-whites on Harbour Island and Eleuthera. Precisely what happened to most of the 400 or so free but indentured African Americans from New York who initially came to Abaco remains unclear. By 1788 there were reportedly less than 200 black people on the island, all of them slaves.

There are no reliable data on the number of free non-whites in this period. Most demographic sources merely give general totals of 'blacks', 'negroes' or 'coloureds'. William Wylly's 1788 tabulation only systematically provides figures for slaves and whites. Those he generally terms 'people of Colour' are rather haphazardly confined to marginal notes and vague estimates; we are told for instance that there

⁹⁵ Presentments of the Grand Jury, 7 December 1790, *Bahama Gazette*, 7 December 1790; Presentments of the Grand Jurors, 30 August 1785, *Bahama Gazette*, 17 September 1785.

⁹⁶ Presentments of the Grand Jurors, 30 August 1785, *Bahama Gazette*, 17 September 1785; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 23 February 1790, *Bahama Gazette*, 9 March 1790.

⁹⁷ Presentments of the Grand Jury, 3 March 1795, BDA, S.C. 1/7.

were ‘also 21 Families of Colour’ on Long Island, and that ‘besides the Inhabitants within enumerated, there are... about three hundred and fifty people of Colour, either free, or pretending to be so.’ Wyly’s overall figure of 500 ‘people of Colour’ is clearly no more than a rough estimate.⁹⁸

This literal marginalisation reflected the mindset and ambitions of Loyalist slaveholders like Wyly. Even more so than in the sugar islands, masters in the colonial South regarded black people who were free as an undesirable anomaly, one that, until the Revolution, they had sought with some success to eliminate.⁹⁹ They were surely the section of Bahamian society that had least to gain and most to lose from the Loyalists’ plantocratic agenda.

But it was also certainly true that during the 1780s, sorting out the non-white population into categories of ‘slave’ and ‘free’ would have been a formidably complicated business. Many Bahamians whom North Americans regarded as ‘coloured’ were legally white until 1802.¹⁰⁰ The available sources offer few clues as to how many such people there were, or how they racially self-identified. The printed version of Wyly’s *Short Account* omits several notes that appear in the manuscript, including one stating that two of the three conch ‘planters’ owning ten or more slaves on Andros were ‘coloured’.¹⁰¹

The status of people below such individuals in the Bahamian hierarchy of race and class fell somewhere within a complex and often confused range of de facto and de jure categories. Free born non-whites suffered less legal discrimination than those who had once been enslaved. Those who were indentured to a former master or other employer were in effect subject to a theoretically temporary unfree status that could prove difficult to escape from. Conversely, as Howard Johnson observes, in practice ‘there was little to distinguish slaves on the self-hire system from freedpersons in the Bahamian context’, other than the economic disadvantage of paying wages to an

⁹⁸ Wyly, *Short Account*, 7–8. Wyly’s figures are reproduced in less detail in the table at CO23/30/336. The figure of ‘about 500...free negroes’ is repeated in the 1791 ‘Sketch of a Report &c.’, Liverpool Papers, Add. MSS 38350, f. 220 (draft version with date at CO23/31/255–9). This report was compiled by a committee of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel from Bahamian documents available in London.

⁹⁹ Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 3–12; on the position and status of free non-whites in the West Indies see for instance Heuman, ‘Social Structure’, 143–51; Heuman, *Between Black and White*; Jerome S. Handler, *The Unappropriated People: Freedmen in the slave society of Barbados* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

¹⁰⁰ See p. 98 above.

¹⁰¹ Cf. [Wyly], ‘Short Account’, Add. MSS 6058, ff. 10–11, and Wyly, *Short Account*, 7.

owner.¹⁰² The unresolved post-war status of African-American émigrés muddied the waters further. On the one hand, there were those who were ‘claiming Freedom and receiving wages, as if they were their own masters’, but who had never been legally freed from their American owners, or whose ‘free passes’ had been lost through accident or foul play.¹⁰³ Then there were people whose formal legal status might be similar, but who were held and claimed as property by slaveholders in the Bahamas. Most African-American émigrés probably fell somewhere between the two extremes of documented proof of freedom and possession by a master with documented proof of title, and of course this ‘confusion of property’ offered myriad opportunities for deception and fraud on all sides.

In such a context, the notion of a distinct free non-white ‘caste’ entails considerable qualification and elaboration. Direct transitions from slavery to the fullest possible extent of legal freedom, and vice versa, were usually relatively uncommon, though they could and did happen. Movement between the various intermediate categories discussed above is harder to trace, but probably happened far more often.¹⁰⁴ In Nassau, as we have seen, there is clear evidence of free and enslaved people living alongside one another, socialising together, and doing the same kinds of work on similar terms.¹⁰⁵

Nonetheless, some free people of colour were independent and prosperous members of late eighteenth-century Bahamian society, who owned land, slaves and other property. Men of colour comprised two companies of the New Providence militia, 120 strong. Free African-American preachers like Sambo Scriven introduced distinctively black versions of Christianity, establishing their own churches and schools by the 1790s.¹⁰⁶ As well as selling liquor to slaves, Timothy Cox, jr. was

¹⁰² Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 33.

¹⁰³ *Bahama Gazette*, 14 January 1786.

¹⁰⁴ See for instance pp. 98–9, 118–20 above.

¹⁰⁵ One striking example of the latter is the pay list for labourers working on the construction of Fort Charlotte, enclosed in Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 30 June 1789, CO23/29/148–9. These labourers included groups of people who were evidently slaves: some have distinctively black names, and they share common surnames with other persons who have signed for their wages. There are also individuals who claimed their own wages, including a ‘Jo Freeman’. At least one, Cesar Bunch, has clearly written his own name; this is the earliest surviving Bahamian sample of writing by someone of African descent that I know of.

¹⁰⁶ Johnson, *Race Relations*, 30–32, 117–22, 51–63; Muster Roll of the Militia of the Island of New Providence, 20 November 1793, CO23/33/23–5; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:329–32.

successful enough in his shipbuilding business to buy slaves and a house in Nassau.¹⁰⁷ He also secured the manumission of his son Jerry, his brother ‘Thomas Cox commonly called... *Tom Farr* a black Man’, who had ‘lately’ been sold to William Farr, a planter on the Caicos islands, and at least three other people.¹⁰⁸

Such visibly successful individuals inherently ‘upset the racial stereotype that was at the heart of the slave society’. Their very existence was both a barrier to plantocratic ambitions to render the ‘two words, *Negro* and *Slave*... Homogenous and Convertible’, and a ubiquitous reminder that routes out of enslavement remained open in Bahamian society.¹⁰⁹

Whether or not these aspects of black Bahamian life can or should be considered in terms of resistance to slavery is a rather open-ended question, whose answer depends very much on the meaning attached to that hugely loaded term. Michael Craton has suggested that ‘in the last analysis, the effectiveness of slave resistance could be judged... by the degree to which those enslaved were able to overcome the constraints of the masters’ system to “make a life of their own.”’ By this criterion, the kinds of partial autonomy that non-whites achieved in Nassau (and elsewhere) in the 1780s might plausibly be regarded as forms of ‘resistance’ in their own right. There is surely a danger here, however, of falling into the tendency to ‘to portray almost every action, or inaction, on the part of the slaves as a form of resistance’.¹¹⁰

In this respect, at least insofar as resistance implies agency, and agency implies volition or intent, the nature of the evidence imposes a need for caution. The available sources were produced exclusively by whites, and mainly by slaveholders. Not much can be known with certainty about the motivation of actual, individual black people,

¹⁰⁷ *Bahama Gazette*, 21 May 1799; Johnson, *Race Relations*, 30.

¹⁰⁸ RGD, Registry Office Book V, ff. 255, 280 (emphasis in original); ‘Register of Freed Slaves Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century’, BDA, ff. 12, 13; ‘Negro Freedoms’, BDA, f. 4.

¹⁰⁹ Heuman, *Between Black and White*, 6; Morgan Godwyn, *The Negro’s and Indians Advocate* (London, 1680), 36.

¹¹⁰ Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, 186; O. Nigel Bolland, “‘The hundredth year of our emancipation’: the dialectics of resistance in slavery and freedom”, in Shepherd, ed., *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom*, 323. Other notable treatments of slave resistance in what is now a very extensive literature include Craton, *Testing the Chains*; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The world the slaves made* (New York: Random House, 1974 edn.); Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1969 edn.); Okihiro, ed., *In Resistance*; Mullin, *Africa in America*; Raymond A. Bauer & Alice Bauer, ‘Day to Day Resistance to Slavery’, *JNH*, 27:4 (October 1947), 388–419; George M. Frederickson & Christopher Lasch, ‘Resistance to Slavery’, *Civil War History*, 13:4 (December 1967), 315–29.

and even when some of their behaviour was recorded, it is filtered through a prism of assumptions and prejudices, and abstracted from contexts that might well have seemed very relevant to the actors themselves. Analogies and insights from other places and times can offer invaluable suggestions as to how the many blanks might be filled in. But without sufficient caution, such an approach can start to look worryingly like interpreting evidence to conform to (and thus confirm) an a priori pattern. Resorting to impressionistic generalities is to some degree unavoidable, for even the selection of more specific examples implies their broader significance. There is an ever-present risk of tacitly overstating the coherence, homogeneity and even intelligibility of a 'community' whose subjectivity is accessible, at best, as a series of fleeting, fragmented and distorted glimpses.

Insofar as these 'enclaves of independence' can plausibly indicate any consistent tendency on the part of black Bahamians, it was merely to minimise their direct contact with and dependence upon the authority of slaveholders, often in ways that had a potential functionality for the slave regime. Self-hire, for instance, gave slavery as an institution the flexibility of alternative modes of exploitation, as well as freeing masters from the immediate responsibilities of subsisting and profitably employing their slaves.¹¹¹ More generally, it can easily be imagined that the degree to which Bahamians were capable of 'creating conditions worth living in as slaves', and even of discerning the possibility of future freedom, might serve to lessen the likelihood of their seeking to directly challenge the regime.¹¹²

As the lowcountry task system shows, masters themselves *could* be comfortable with what can seem like a surprising level of slave autonomy, where they could discern a benefit to themselves. In the Bahamas, however, it seemed to many slaveholders that this autonomy had a subversive tendency to shade into and even facilitate more illicit and less tolerable behaviour and attitudes. Black people who chose to 'assemble together in any noisy, riotous or tumultuous manner', to drink, gamble, and sell goods in the streets not only flouted the regime's standards of

¹¹¹ For an argument that historians have tended to over-state the benefits of self-hire for slaves see Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave hiring in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 174–8.

¹¹² Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 594. Stephen Whitman argues that slaveholders in Maryland 'employed offers of delayed manumission in the ongoing management of slave workers, as an incentive to spur more production while reconciling future freedpeople to temporary bondage' in 'Diverse Good Causes: Manumission and the transformation of urban slavery', *Social Science History*, 19:3 (Autumn 1995), 333–70 (quotation at 334).

acceptable conduct (and the law). They did so in a very public way, drawing attention to how far ‘the Laws made for the Government of negroes &c. in these Islands are greatly neglected’.¹¹³

Grand Jurors believed that the black social culture was funded by ‘recourse to the most villainous practices by stealing and otherwise’. Hawking was similarly said to ‘encourage Robbery and Theft by affording a specious and safe opportunity of selling stolen Goods’.¹¹⁴ Reporting the burglary of a Nassau store in 1786, the *Bahama Gazette* observed that ‘instances of this sort were, till of late, very rare here; but the Frequency of them now, demands the serious consideration of every inhabitant.’ Enterprising slaves were certainly imaginative in finding ways to make money via ‘illegally appropriated goods’, as John Wells discovered when he ‘received Information of Newspapers being sold by a Negro Fellow of his’.¹¹⁵

The illegal appropriation that gave masters most cause for concern was, of course, that of (and by) slaves themselves. But ‘running away’, or (petit) marronage, can be a deceptively reductive term, that lumps together a rather diverse and heterogeneous assortment of behaviours into a single category. The precise aims and motives of runaways like John, ‘an old Offender in this Way’ who ‘obtained Pardon for twelve Months absence’ only to take flight again in 1789, when he was ‘imagined to be lurking in the Neighbourhood of this Town’ must ultimately remain obscure. Nonetheless, it seems doubtful whether they had very much in common those of the African Americans Pindar and her husband Peter, who ‘went off in a new Luggage Boat’ from a Long Island plantation with their four sons and three other slaves.¹¹⁶

Whether or not it actively encouraged runaways, they could readily take advantage of the prevalence of the self-hire system. The regularity with which owners cautioned against ‘harbouring or employing’ fugitives suggests how readily ‘artful and plausible’ blacks could obtain work in Nassau with few questions asked, especially if they were as versatile as Jack Clark, who had variously ‘worked out as a Jobbing

¹¹³ Presentments of the Grand Jury, 28 May 1788, BDA, S.C. 1/2.

¹¹⁴ Presentments of the Grand Jury, 3 March 1795, BDA, S.C. 1/7.

¹¹⁵ *Bahama Gazette*, 21 July 1786; Linebaugh & Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 181; *Bahama Gazette*, 20 June 1789. Enslaved criminality is discussed in the context of marronage in Marvin L. Kay & Lorin Lee Cary, “‘They are Indeed the Constant Plague of Their Tyrants’: Slave defence of a moral economy in colonial North Carolina, 1784–1772”, in Gad Heuman, ed., *Out of the House of Bondage: Runaways, resistance and marronage in Africa and the New World* (London: Frank Cass, 1986), 37–9.

¹¹⁶ *Bahama Gazette*, 13 February 1788, 30 April 1785.

Carpenter, Wall Builder or labourer'. Carpenters in particular seem to have found a ready market for their skills. Many runaway artisans followed the example of Polydore, 'a Stout well made Mulatto Man... by trade a Carpenter and Boat Builder', who had 'lately carried away two new sets of tools, necessary for such business.'¹¹⁷

Slaveholders also often suspected that extensive social and kinship networks, sometimes stretching to North America, enabled fugitives, especially women, to remain at large for extended periods. Despite being 'well known about Town', Charlotte and her three children were able to elude Thomas Forbes for at least four months in 1793, apparently thanks to her being 'harboured by some of her numerous Acquaintances in this Island.' In 1789 Alexander Inglis reported the flight of a 'sensible and very artful woman' named Dumba from Charleston. He believed she had gone to join her 'many acquaintances in Georgia, and New-Providence', where she might 'attempt to pass for a free Woman' by the name of Bella.¹¹⁸ Loyalist 'Negroe Driver' Thomas Commander offered a rather lavish reward of 50 guineas in 1785 for the return of five African Americans who he supposed to have gone to New Providence, where Sue, 'a tall slim made wench of a yellowish complexion', had once lived, and where her mother still resided. They had originally run away in South Carolina six years earlier.¹¹⁹

Although hard evidence of their active complicity was rarely forthcoming, the presence of 'prodigious numbers' of free non-whites in Nassau was widely seen by slaveholders as facilitating marronage. In particular, 'the settlement of free Negroes behind the Government house' was regarded 'as a most enormous nuisance in harbouring Runaway Slaves, and insulting several people who have gone in search of their Property.'¹²⁰

Thomas Rigby advertised for the return of Binah, a woman described only as 'very black', very tall and 'well known', in 1788 following a six week absence during which she had 'been frequently seen about the Negro Town'.¹²¹ Similarly, Jackson, 'a stout made Negro Fellow', was said to have 'associated himself with several Runaway

¹¹⁷ *Bahama Gazette*, 1 October, 1785, 10 December 1785.

¹¹⁸ *Bahama Gazette*, 1 February 1793, 31 May 1793, 21 November 1789.

¹¹⁹ *Bahama Gazette*, 19 November 1785; Loyalist Petition, enclosure in Dunmore to Sydney, 29 February 1788, CO23/27/103-5.

¹²⁰ Presentments of the Grand Jury, 24 February 1789, BDA, S.C. 1/2; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 28 May 1788, BDA, S.C. 1/2.

¹²¹ *Bahama Gazette*, 5 April 1788.

Negroes, who are encamped in the bushes somewhere behind the Hospital' when he ran away in October 1785 for at least four months. For his pains, he would be fitted with 'a large chain and iron collar fastened with a double bolted padlock around his ankle'. Nonetheless, in November 1786, this rather colourful figure escaped once more from his owner, Loyalist merchant and planter John Morris. Jackson, by now said to possess 'the looks of a compleat villain', had made directly for what Morris now referred to as 'that harbour for villains, the Negro Town behind the Hospital'.¹²²

Hence, William Wylly's matter of fact observation that Bahamian 'people of Colour... are mostly however runaways from the American States' was no more than a commonplace assumption for Loyalist masters.¹²³ In the context of the drive to re-enslavement, this casual elision of free people with fugitive slaves takes on a rather sinister aspect. But at the same time, what gave such thinking credibility was the ability of so many people to evade or defy the power that slaveholders and the regime claimed over their lives.

Of course, the distinctiveness of the situation in Nassau during the 1780s should not be over-stated. As we saw in chapter two, such phenomena as the prevalence of the self-hire system, the substantial free coloured population, and a rowdy nocturnal sociability, are very much in evidence in Schoepf's account of the Bahamas on the eve of the Loyalist migration. There are also clear parallels with the experience of slavery in other urban settings, calling to mind Frederick Douglass's well-known observation that 'a city slave is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on the plantation.'¹²⁴ In cities and towns around the Atlantic, enslaved people were able to earn money, live apart from their owners and maintain an independent social culture. Slaveholders routinely denounced the autonomy of urban black people as excessive and subversive, but rarely succeeded in curbing it; South Carolina passed

¹²² *Bahama Gazette*, 11 February 1786, 4 November 1786. Morris was a signatory to various Loyalist petitions in East Florida and the Bahamas; see Lockety, *East Florida*, 158; CO23/27/103-5; CO37/23/5. By 1794 he was proprietor of the Mount Morris plantation on Long Island; see *Bahama Gazette*, 10 October 1794. Sadly, like most Bahamian runaways, Jackson's fate is unknown. He may have been the unnamed 'outlaw belonging to Mr. John Morris' whose capture by John Muir in 1787 is noted in the Journals of the Council, 12 October 1787, CO23/27/71.

¹²³ Wylly, *Short Account*, 8.

¹²⁴ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, eds. John W. Blassingame, John R. McKivigan & Peter P. Hinks (1845; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001 edn.), 32.

three separate laws prohibiting self-hire during the eighteenth century, without managing to suppress the practice.¹²⁵

Indeed, port cities in particular were widely regarded as hotbeds of disorder and lawlessness in the eighteenth-century Atlantic. The anonymity, economic opportunities and mobility that such places offered were attractive for runaway slaves, free people of colour, and ‘masterless’ people of all descriptions. For elite whites and colonial authorities, it seemed that the bounds of race, nationality and private property were in continual danger of subversion in the urban environment. Some historians have discerned a trend of increasing concern with problems of social control in cities across English-speaking America in the wake of the American Revolution, and Nassau would certainly seem to fit such a pattern.¹²⁶

Likewise, marronage was a ubiquitous feature of Atlantic slavery, a fact of life that masters everywhere had to contend with. Running away is a relatively well-documented aspect of resistance to slavery in the Bahamas, thanks largely to the advertisements for the return of runaways that appear in the *Bahama Gazette*. This material constitutes an important, not to say invaluable resource; it sheds a unique light not only upon a practice rendered inherently obscure by its clandestine nature, but on many other aspects of black life besides. Unfortunately, however, what it does not provide is any reliable indication of how many slaves actually ran away.

The fairly extensive scholarship on marronage has convincingly shown that ‘advertised runaways represent only the most visible tip of an otherwise indeterminate iceberg’. Historians have made considerable efforts to provide ‘independent checks on the degree and significance of running away... through the use of planter correspondence, plantation accounts, and inventories’, but even with a relatively abundant supply of such evidence, estimates of the extent of the phenomenon can claim no greater precision than orders of magnitude. For the eighteenth-century Bahamas, where additional sources of this kind are scarce to say the least, efforts ‘to

¹²⁵ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 155–61; O. Nigel Bolland, ‘Proto-Proletarians? Slave wages in the Americas. Between Slave Labour & Free Labour’, in Turner, ed., *Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves*, 126–32; Martin, *Divided Mastery*, 21–5, 161–8.

¹²⁶ See for example Mullin, ‘Era of War and Revolution’, 242–6; Scott, ‘The Common Wind’, 6–58; Linebaugh & Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 174–210, 227–36. On the significance of ‘masterless men’ see Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975 edn.), 39–49.

rescue the problem of runaway numbers from the realm of naked guesswork' have little prospect of success.¹²⁷

Moreover, there are good reasons for doubting that the individuals described in advertisements constitute a representative cross-section of the people who ran away. The likelihood of flight resulting in a runaway advertisement may have been influenced by a host of factors, such as the value of an absentee, and a calculation of the cost and difficulty of advertising against the probability of its being successful, which in turn would depend upon the master's reckoning of why someone had run away, where they had gone, and the chances of their voluntary return.¹²⁸

One illustration of this issue is the apparent under-representation of the Out Islands in the Bahamian advertisements. The latter are variously described as containing between a third and three-fifths of the total non-white population during the 1780s. But only 21 of the 112 fugitives advertised between 1784–9 are identifiably from the Out Islands. It is entirely plausible that Out Island slaveholders were less likely to go the trouble of advertising for absentees in the *Bahama Gazette*, and certainly there are anecdotal reports of extensive marronage on some islands that apparently did not translate into runaway notices.¹²⁹ On the other hand, there is also no way of discounting the possibility that slaves on New Providence were indeed more likely to run away, and of course these hypotheses are not mutually exclusive.

Indeed, the disparity may be largely illusory. For almost a third of these 112 runaways, the advertisements provide no indication of where they lived at all. In the face of so many uncertainties and unknown factors, and in the absence of further evidence, there is little prospect of resolving such questions. Unfortunately, there is a similar degree of unevenness about more or less all the information available from the runaway advertisements. Details of fugitives' appearance, background, occupations

¹²⁷ Philip D. Morgan, 'Colonial South Carolina Runaways: Their significance for slave culture', in Heuman, ed., *House of Bondage*, 57; Gad Heuman, introduction in *House of Bondage*, 2; David Geggus, 'On the Eve of the Haitian Revolution: Slave Runaways in Saint Domingue in the year 1790', in Heuman, ed., *House of Bondage*, 117. For an estimate of the overall scale of marronage in the antebellum United States, see John Hope Franklin & Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the plantation* (New York: OUP, 1999), 279–82.

¹²⁸ Morgan, 'Colonial South Carolina Runaways', 57–8; Geggus, 'Eve of the Haitian Revolution', 114–5.

¹²⁹ See for instance the anonymous letter from Crooked Island, dated 14 April 1790, complaining of the 'constant elopement of our negroes' as 'one continual drain to the Bahama Islands' that 'hurts us not a little', in the New York *Daily Advertiser*, 14 May 1790, reprinted in *Bahama Gazette*, 9 July 1790.

and supposed motives do appear, but, aside from gender, not with any consistency.¹³⁰ The semblance of precision provided by quantifying the occurrence of such attributes would be misleading, insofar as any resulting analysis would be of an arbitrary (and small) sample of the advertised runaways, who are themselves merely an arbitrary selection of the total number of absentees. Furthermore, even granting the very doubtful assumption that such a sample is representative of runaways in general, there is little or no contemporary evidence for the prevalence of most such traits in the overall slave population. Interpretive generalisations about Bahamian marronage based upon such doubtful and incomplete evidence would surely amount to no more than the most tentative speculation.

Still another difficulty is that so many of the advertisements themselves are missing. There are only two extant issues of the *Bahama Gazette* from 1788, and none at all from 1787. Strikingly, however, just these two issues contain advertisements for 23 fugitives – more than were advertised in the *whole* of 1786, and comparable to the totals for 1789 and 1790.¹³¹ One again, this isolated fragment of evidence does little more than pose questions to which definitive answers are not forthcoming. The notion that Bahamian marronage may have escalated starkly in those years is broadly consistent with the impression conveyed by other sources, as will be discussed below. On the other hand, it may be simply an anomaly.

Nonetheless, the conditions of the 1780s can hardly have alleviated the generic difficulties associated with managing urban slavery in Nassau. Even aside from the general confusion and disruption caused by the arrival of the Loyalists, the consequences of such a relatively large and sudden influx of people must have been considerable. By 1785, the non-white population of New Providence had rather more than doubled. Over the next few years, the island's demography remained very much in flux, with new émigrés continuing to arrive at the same time as substantial numbers

¹³⁰ Of 112 advertised fugitives, 26 were female and 91 male (with one child unspecified), a proportion that is broadly consistent with runaway advertisements from other times and places: cf. for instance Morgan, 'Colonial South Carolina Runaways', 68; Geggus, 'Eve of the Haitian Revolution', 115, 117–8; Gad Heuman, 'Runaway Slaves in Nineteenth-Century Barbados', in Heuman, ed., *House of Bondage*, 98–100; Franklin & Schwenger, *Runaway Slaves*, 210–13; Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 40.

¹³¹ There were 7 fugitives advertised in 1784 (the *Bahama Gazette* was first printed in August 1784, and the first four issues are missing); 41 in 1785; 14 in 1786; 28 in 1789, and 26 in 1790.

The two issues from 1788 are preserved in the Colonial Office papers at CO23/31/246, 250–51.

of people were relocated to the Out Islands to build the new plantation economy.¹³² Craton and Saunders observe that during this period ‘Nassau must have seemed very much a frontier town, bursting at its seams and constantly changing’. Unfamiliar faces would have been a routine sight in a port where immigrants outnumbered ‘old inhabitants’, and which saw continual traffic with both the Out Islands and the wider Atlantic, especially after the 1787 Free Port Act opened Nassau to trade with the French and Spanish colonies.¹³³

Certainly, slaveholders expressed concern and growing frustration at what seemed to them the manifest failure of the colonial state, and of Bahamian society generally, to effectively address these heightened problems of social control. The Grand Jury complained repeatedly of the ‘want of the most essential regulations of police in this town’, apparently to minimal effect.¹³⁴ Lieutenant Governor Powell urged the Assembly to pass ‘a Patrole Act to secure us from those who may become internal foes’ in 1785. Four years later the *Bahama Gazette* repeated the call for ‘the establishment of a night watch, or patrole, to guard the properties of the inhabitants against the depredations of run-away negroes and other banditti’, but no action was apparently taken until the 1790s.¹³⁵ The Nassau constables were repeatedly criticised for their ‘total neglect of enforcing the Salutary Clauses of the several Laws of these Islands, for the Government of Negroes and other Slaves’. In 1790, the Grand Jury went so far as to specifically censure six named officers ‘for refusing to assist John Lewis Frazer in the Execution of his Duty in dispersing riotous Negroes in the Night’.¹³⁶

¹³² ‘Bahama Islands’ [1785], Add. MSS 38346, f. 56; see also pp. 132–3 above.

¹³³ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:192.

¹³⁴ Presentments of the Grand Jurors, 30 August 1785, *Bahama Gazette*, 17 September 1785; cf. Presentments of the Grand Jury, 24 February 1789, BDA, S.C. 1/2; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 25 February 1791, BDA, S.C. 1/4; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 27 February 1794, BDA, S.C. 1/7.

Although by no means composed exclusively of Loyalists or slaveholders, the Grand Jury was acknowledged to represent the opinion of ‘almost all the principal Planters and Merchants’: see Wyllly to Stokes, 17 July 1789, CO23/29/233.

¹³⁵ Powell’s speech to the General Assembly, 21 September 1785, *Bahama Gazette*, 15 October 1785; *Bahama Gazette*, 10 January 1789; letter from ‘An Inhabitant’, *Bahama Gazette*, 8 November 1793.

¹³⁶ Presentments of the Grand Jury, 28 May 1788, BDA, S.C. 1/2; 23 Presentments of the Grand Jury, 23 February 1790, BDA, S.C. 1/2; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 31 August 1790, BDA, S.C. 1/4.

A recurring complaint concerned the ‘ruinous situation of the Court House and Prison’, from which inmates, usually slaves or free people of colour, regularly escaped. In the absence of ‘a Proper Work-House... for the Punishment and for the confinement of disorderly and criminal Negroes’, the authorities were under the necessity of ‘promiscuously confining under the same roof... unfortunate debtors, abandoned criminals, and dissolute slaves’.¹³⁷

The Grand Jurors’ view that ‘nothing, we apprehend, can be more improper’ than this practice may have reflected broader concerns regarding the attitude of white Bahamians. While the latter may have taken slavery and the racialisation of social status for granted, they were apparently largely indifferent towards Loyalist demands for a drastic tightening and intensification of race and class discipline. Unsurprisingly, there was little conch enthusiasm for ‘laws... designed... to convert the entire white community into an extensive police force’, primarily for the benefit of a would-be plantocratic elite.¹³⁸

For slaveholders, these circumstances made dealing with marronage at once harder and all the more imperative. By dramatising the weakness of the regime, slaves who successfully escaped or remained at large for extended periods necessarily undermined it further. The same was true of individuals like Boston Love, a ‘Negro Fellow’ who managed to ‘forcibly break Prison’ while ‘under Sentence of Transportation’, and who was considered ‘so notorious an Offender’ by Governor Powell that his recapture was a matter ‘of the utmost Consequence to the Community’.¹³⁹

By 1786, slaveholders on New Providence had to contend with a ‘Gang of Runaway Negroes’ who had ‘for some months past committed many thefts with impunity’, and had established a ‘Camp on the Blue Hills in the interior part of this Island’. In the apparent absence of any effective response from the state, a ‘party of Woodsmen’ were ‘sent in quest’ for this maroon band, managing to kill one of them and capture two more. However, the *Bahama Gazette*’s ‘hope soon to have it in our

¹³⁷ Presentments of the Grand Jurors, 30 August 1785, *Bahama Gazette*, 17 September 1785; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 24 February 1789, BDA, S.C. 1/2. For examples of escapes from the gaol see for instance *Bahama Gazette*, 16 November 1785, 10 December 1785, 28 September 1786, 4 October 1790.

¹³⁸ Presentments of the Grand Jurors, 30 August 1785, *Bahama Gazette*, 17 September 1785; Hilary McD. Beckles, ‘Social and Political Control in the Slave Society’, in Knight, ed., *General History*, 3:196.

¹³⁹ Proclamation by Powell, 16 November 1785, *Bahama Gazette*, 19 November 1785.

power to give a good account of the rest of these banditti' was not fulfilled. In 1789, it was still the case that 'every theft or burglary is attributed to the run-away Negroes', and there would remain a 'considerable Body of Negroes... collected together in the interior Parts of this Island' into the 1790s and beyond.¹⁴⁰

On Abaco, as early as 1785 Loyalist settlers were struggling to cope with extensive maroon activity. Cornelius Blanchard wrote to Powell on behalf of the New York émigrés, pleading for aid, after 'a Number of Negroes had taken the Wood, and have so Robbed the Places, that they have now no support left'.¹⁴¹ Unfortunately, this fragment of testimony exists in virtual isolation, as a tantalising suggestion of how little is known of what was happening on the Out Islands. We hear no more about events on Abaco until an equally brief report of a more serious incident over two years later, discussed below. There is no indication of what support, if any, Powell was able to provide, and notably, but perhaps unsurprisingly, there is only a single definitely Abaconian runaway advertisement from the 1780s.¹⁴²

Blanchard's letter does not refer explicitly to slaves, and of course the African Americans who came to Abaco via New York were free people who had been indentured to the white émigrés accompanying them. Conflicts over the terms and duration of this imposed servitude may well have underpinned what happened on Abaco in 1785, and it is clear that such indentures were sometimes extended by dubious means, as in the case of Tom Patrick discussed above.¹⁴³

This raises the more general question of the relationship between Bahamian marronage in the 1780s and the unclear legal status of African Americans. Certainly, the presence in the Bahamas of 'Negroes, the property of the Inhabitants of the Southern States of America' who were living, openly or otherwise, as free people added a further layer of ambiguity to the messy and complicated frontier between freedom and enslavement. Such uncertainties could offer opportunities for resourceful individuals like Jemmy, who was able to pass 'for a free man by a false pass, which

¹⁴⁰ *Bahama Gazette*, 25 March 1786, 10 January 1789; Proclamation by Lord Dunmore, 17 June 1790, *Bahama Gazette*, 18 June 1790.

¹⁴¹ Blanchard to Powell, 6 April 1785, Albert Lowe Museum, New Plymouth, Abaco, facsimile in Steve Dodge, *Abaco: the history of an Out Island and its cays* (Decateur: White Sound Press, 1983), 25.

¹⁴² *Bahama Gazette*, 17 June 1786.

¹⁴³ See pp. 119–20 above.

has been proved, under the name of John Collins, struck out, and George Greenhill interlined.’¹⁴⁴

On the other hand, it was all too easy for unscrupulous slaveholders to exploit the situation, using allegations of ‘false passes’ and the like to support dubious property claims at the expense of black émigrés. Unfortunately, there is little firm evidence regarding to what extent, if any, running away was a direct response to re-enslavement. The runaway advertisements are usually silent concerning motives for flight, and indeed even clear indications of fugitives’ backgrounds are uncommon. Of the 113 runaways mentioned in extant advertisements from the *Bahama Gazette* from the years 1784–9, only 27 are explicitly identified as African Americans. Nonetheless, it is striking that of the remainder, 53 are associated with owners, former owners and employers who are known to be Loyalists. Just 10 runaways are described in ways that clearly preclude a North American origin, such as ‘country born’ or ‘new negroes’.¹⁴⁵

In view of the uncertainty of so much of the data and the relative smallness of the sample, the pattern suggested by these figures should, of course, be treated with caution. Even assuming that most of these runaway advertisements were for African Americans, a higher incidence of flight among the latter is far from being the only way of accounting for such a pattern. There are various plausible reasons why Loyalist slaveholders may have been more likely to advertise for runaways. They may have been less tolerant of absenteeism, or less likely to believe that slaves would return of their own volition. North Americans may simply have been more accustomed to advertising in a newspaper, which was after all a recent innovation for Bahamians.

Aside from runaway advertisements, however, anecdotal evidence conveys a strong impression of mounting tensions in the later 1780s, manifested in increasingly direct and violent confrontation between slaveholders and non-whites. Lord Dunmore arrived as governor of the Bahamas in October 1787, to be met with reports of how ‘a Number of Negroes have for some time Absented themselves from their owners or employers, and were plundering and committing Outrages upon the Inhabitants of [New Providence] and several of the other Islands.’ On Abaco, where ‘numbers of the

¹⁴⁴ *Bahama Gazette*, 14 January 1786; *Bahama Gazette*, 24 June 1786.

¹⁴⁵ The number of Loyalists includes only those advertisers whom I was able to positively identify as such, using the various prosopographical sources discussed at p. 37 above. In the absence of comparable resources for other Bahamians, definitively identifying individuals as non-Loyalists is relatively problematic, so this figure should very much be regarded as a lower limit.

outlying Negroes went about with muskets and fix'd Bayonets, robbing and plundering', the whites 'had collected themselves in a body, and having come up with the Negroes had killed, wounded and taken most of them Prisoners'. Around the same time, the appearance of a transport with orders to embark the garrison 'caused a very general alarm... among all ranks of people, as well with respect to their property as the support of Civil Government.' Dunmore refused to allow the troops to leave, and garrison commander General McArthur observed to Secretary of State Lord Sydney that 'it has happened pretty fortunately that they were detained, considering the daring behaviour of the Negroes'.¹⁴⁶

By now, the 'Negro Town' in Nassau was regarded not merely as 'an Asylum for runaways and Negro Offenders of every description'. William Wylly claimed that 'no white Person dares make his appearance within it, but at the risk of his life. Many have been assaulted, and nearly destroyed there'.¹⁴⁷ It was also the target for intimidatory violence from Loyalist slaveholders. According to Dunmore's account of one episode in December 1787:

five or six Gentlemen with swords & Pistols went in the night to the House of a Free Mulatto woman with seven or eight children, broke open the doors by breaking the locks & bolts all to pieces, beat the poor Old Woman, cut in the head one of her daughters & otherwise abused or alarmed the rest of the Family...

Woken by 'cries of Murder', Dunmore sent his servants to intervene. The attackers' leader, John M. Tattnall, then Searcher of Customs for the colony, defiantly informed one of the governor's men that 'he neither cared for His Majesty or any other man.' Arraigned before a magistrate the next day, the men claimed to have been looking for runaways, whom they suspected the free coloureds of harbouring. The unrepentant Tattnall 'swore he would burn every House belonging to the Free Negroes in that quarter of the Town.'

Faced with a situation that had already escalated to the point where 'excesses of every kind appear here as perfect trifles', Dunmore professed his resolve that 'such

¹⁴⁶ Journal of the Council, 26 October 1787, CO23/27/72; Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 20 November 1787, CO23/27/75; McArthur to Sydney, Nassau, 27 November 1787, CO23/27/74.

¹⁴⁷ Wylly, *Short Account*, 42, n.

outrages shall not if in my power to avoid it go unnoticed'.¹⁴⁸ As we will see in the next chapter, he quickly became convinced that the only way to restore order was by addressing the unresolved issues surrounding the freedom and re-enslavement of the African-American émigrés.

¹⁴⁸ Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 20 December 1787, CO23/27/92–3; 'An Account of the present Situation of Affairs in the Bahama Islands', c. 1788, CO23/28/151. Tattnall's remarks are misattributed to his father, Josiah, in Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:200. By 1794, Tattnall's cotton plantations, Bonaventure at Grand Caicos, and Freeman's Halt on Cat Island, comprised at least 1,600 acres; see *Bahama Gazette*, 28 February 1794.

Chapter Four

‘Disentangled from the Disgraceful Shackles of Slavery’: Lord Dunmore and State Manumission in the Bahamas, 1787–1793

The previous three chapters have sought in part to show how the dynamics of revolution facilitated the ability of thousands African Americans to wholly or partially disengage themselves from the confines of the North American slave regime, and how the repercussions of this were played out in the Bahamas during the 1780s. The British state, through the actions of imperial officials like Lord Dunmore, had played a central role in this process. This chapter explores how and why, as governor of the Bahamas from 1787, Dunmore became involved in the competing aspirations of black and white émigrés regarding freedom and re-enslavement. It firstly traces a trajectory of escalating intervention by Dunmore in the status of African Americans in the Bahamas and the ensuing political confrontation between the governor and white Loyalist émigrés. The second section presents both new and previously neglected evidence of how hundreds of black émigrés were ‘disentangled from the disgraceful shackles of Slavery’ as a result.¹ The final section goes on to argue that these events can best be understood by situating Dunmore very much in the context of the wider ideas about slavery, freedom, and empire discussed in chapter one.

¹ ‘Sketch of a report &c.’ [1791], Add. MSS 38350, f. 220; on this document see p. 139, n. 98 above.

I: ‘To give these poor people redress’: Dunmore, Re-enslavement, and Freedom in the Bahamas

‘An Hesitation as to Means is not one of the Defects of his Character’

Lieutenant Governor John Forbes on Lord Dunmore, 1797²

On his arrival as governor of the Bahamas, as we saw at the end of the previous chapter, Lord Dunmore found himself in a colony where ‘Disorder of every kind has long prevailed’. He would soon conclude that the unrest ‘has taken such deep root’ that drastic measures would be necessary. His first despatch to the Secretary of State related the worrying extent of marronage in the islands, especially on Abaco, where enslaved black people were either on the brink of, or actually in, a state of open insurrection. Dunmore then went on to observe of Bahamian runaways that ‘many of them claim their freedom under the Proclamations issued by the Commanders in Chief of His Majesty’s forces in America during the late war’, and that ‘I have ordered enquiry to be made into the nature of their Claims.’ He added the somewhat guarded remark that ‘this enquiry has given umbrage to some persons here, who had detained several of these poor unhappy people under various pretences & in a State of Slavery.’³

Some months later, in March 1788, Dunmore elaborated upon this theme in a private letter to Evan Nepean, Undersecretary of the Home Department. Here, he stated that that the same ‘malcontents of this Colony’ who had previously opposed Governor Maxwell ‘have again set all their engines to work if possible to obstruct every measure of Government in these Islands.’ Dunmore was ‘now convinced’ that sinister motives lay behind renewed Loyalist agitation for dissolution of the Assembly. He asserted that Loyalist slaveholders were seeking

to pass such acts as would secure to them the property of a great number of them poor Blacks who deserted from their Rebel Masters, and came into the British Lines, on the British Generals issuing their Proclamations promising those freedom that did so, these fellows... holding a great proportion of their

² Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 20 February 1797 (‘Private’), CO23/35/165.

³ Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 20 December 1787, CO23/27/92; Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 20 November 1787, CO23/27/75.

property by decoying these poor Creatures from the different Towns, when we evacuated them on the Continent of America, under pretence of saving them from the Hands of their Old Masters,... and have Held them in Bondage till my arrival here.⁴

Much the same thing had been said before by people like Receiver General George Barry and Governor Maxwell.⁵ But where Maxwell had recoiled from the idea of a showdown with the Loyalists, if anything, Dunmore seemed to relish such a prospect. Virtually his first act as governor, taken only a day after he assumed the office, was to proclaim 'His Majesty's most gracious and free Pardon' to 'Negroes [who] have for a considerable Time absented themselves from their Owners or Employers.'⁶

A second proclamation in November extended the deadline allowed for runaways to give themselves up to the authorities. But it also noted that 'many of the said Negroes may be apprehensive of surrendering themselves lest they may be still deemed Slaves, notwithstanding their claiming their Freedom.' Such people were directed to apply to the Receiver General, who was 'to enquire into the nature of such claims of freedom', and would 'give a Certificate of such freedom' where those claims were found to be 'properly founded.'⁷

Shortly afterwards, two slaveholders opened lawsuits against Receiver General Barry and various magistrates 'for their Judicial Proceedings, in liberating two Negroes.' Dunmore was probably already contemplating the need for 'new laws' in response to these actions when, in December, Loyalists took matters into their own hands via the vigilante assault on Nassau's 'Negro Town' discussed in chapter three above. Shocked by the violence of this episode, and by the perpetrators' open defiance

⁴ Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 4 March 1788 ('Private'), CO23/27/112; see for instance Petition for Dissolution, New Providence, n.d., enclosure in Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 29 February 1788, CO23/27/102-5; 'Memorial of the Inhabitants of Long Island', 1 January 1788, CO23/27/110; Memorial of 'Planters and other Inhabitants' of Abaco, n.d., enclosure in Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 12 March 1788, CO23/27/119.

⁵ See pp. 115-7 above.

⁶ Proclamation by Lord Dunmore, Nassau, 27 October 1787, CO23/27/77.

⁷ Proclamation by Lord Dunmore, Nassau, 7 November 1787, CO23/27/78.

of his authority, Dunmore was now determined to ‘do everything in my power to give these poor people redress’.⁸

His resolve was manifested in the form of the ‘Act for explaining and amending’ the 1784 slave code, which received the governor’s assent on 25 February 1788, and was published the following day. Considering that it generated an explosion of criticism loud enough to be registered in the pages of the London *Times*,⁹ this short piece of legislation has received surprisingly little attention in Bahamian historiography. In fairness, however, the significance attributed to the measure by contemporaries is difficult to infer from the wording of the Act, framed by Chief Justice John Matson;¹⁰ at first glance, it scarcely represents a radical departure from either the spirit or the letter of the 1784 slave code.

For the most part, the 1788 amendment merely elaborates on the previous Act’s provisions for the Receiver General and two magistrates to ‘Assemble... for the purpose of hearing and determining the Claims or Applications of Negroes... who shall or may claim to be intitled to... their freedom.’ Those officials were to meet on the first Monday of each month, and were ‘authorized and required... to examine the Manumissions, Passes, Certificates, Bills of Sale and other Deeds and writings to be produced at any such meetings, and to examine any... persons upon Oath’, and to report their findings to the governor. For each such case heard, the magistrates and Receiver General were to receive payments of sixteen and thirty-two shillings respectively. Severe penalties were now prescribed for attempts to subvert the operation of what would become widely known as the ‘negro court.’ Individuals found to have claimed blacks as property on the basis of fraudulent documents were to be fined £30. Anyone removing non-whites from the colony while their claims of freedom were pending would be liable to a £300 fine.¹¹

The new law’s crucial innovation was to empower the governor ‘to give a Certificate under his Hand and Seal from time to time to any Negro... adjudged to be

⁸ ‘State of the Several Suits mentioned in the Memorial of William Wylly’, 29 June 1789, CO23/29/139–41; Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 4 March 1788 (‘Private’), CO23/27/114; Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 20 December 1787, CO23/27/92–3.

⁹ *The Times*, 10 December 1788.

¹⁰ ‘An Account of the present Situation of Affairs in the Bahama Islands’, c. 1788, CO23/28/156.

¹¹ ‘An Act for explaining and amending an Act passed in the Twenty Fourth Year of His present Majesty’s Reign, Intituled “An Act for governing Negroes, Mulattoes, Mustees and Indians, and for suspending several Acts therein mentioned”’, 28 Geo. III, 26 February 1788, CO23/29/15–21.

Free' that was to 'be deemed... as a full proof of the freedom of the Negro.' Thus, what had been a purely judicial process was now linked to and buttressed by the authority of the executive branch, and ultimately that of the Crown, as represented in the colony by the governor. While ostensibly merely clarifying the legal provisions approved by Maxwell in 1784, Dunmore had secured a central role for himself in the adjudication of freedom. The governor's opinion as to the primary purpose of that process had already been signified by his proclamation of November 1787. A further indication was provided by the stipulation that those 'ajudged to be free in consequence of any Proclamation issued by any of His Majesty's Officers or Commanders during the late disturbance in America' were to be exempt from the £90 bond that was still theoretically due from Bahamian freedpeople. For it was no secret to Loyalist slaveholders or African Americans that the first of those commanders to issue such a proclamation had been none other than John Murray, earl of Dunmore.¹²

The catalyst for the eventual outburst of explicit condemnation of the 1788 Act, and of Dunmore's governorship in general, was the ostensibly trivial quarrel between Chief Justice Matson and William Wylly, who had recently arrived in the Bahamas from New Brunswick.¹³

Matson had initially courted Wylly as a potential ally of the governor against 'the malcontents of this Colony', securing his appointment as Solicitor General and entreating him to accept command of a militia company. The two men fell out over the vacant position of judge of the Nassau vice-admiralty court, and after resigning as Solicitor General on 31 March 1788, the next day Wylly called Matson 'a Damned Liar' in the street. Matson then prevailed upon Dunmore to have Wylly arrested and arraigned, on the somewhat dubious grounds of having brought the office of Chief Justice into disrepute. Wylly was released without charge the next day, and on 3 April his attorney Robert Johnston issued a writ against Matson for wrongful arrest. The Chief Justice departed for England five days later, leaving 'with a degree of secrecy

¹² 'An Act for explaining and amending an Act passed in the Twenty Fourth Year of His present Majesty's Reign, Intituled "An Act for governing Negroes, Mulattoes, Mustees and Indians, and for suspending several Acts therein mentioned"', 26 February 1788, CO23/29/16.

¹³ On Wylly see p. 33 above.

and adroitness that would have outwitted half the Myrmidons of Bow Street’, according to Wylly.¹⁴

For protagonists on both sides, this seemingly rather petty and essentially personal dispute reflected larger grievances and antagonisms. To Wylly, his arrest clearly showed ‘how completely the dearest Privilege of the People, the Right of Personal Liberty, is trifled with in this miserable country.’ In court, the two judges were subjected ‘to the most gross and abusive language that can possibly be conceived’ by Robert Johnston for having been a party to ‘an Act of the *basest Tyranny and Oppression*.’¹⁵ Dunmore claimed that the Chief Justice had been compelled to leave when it became ‘unsafe for him to continue longer here.’ Matson himself suggested that he had been singled out for persecution because of his role in framing the 1788 Act, for which he had ‘incurred the Displeasure of a lot of People who held Negro Property upon very disputable Grounds.’ To the governor, the whole affair was another example of the iniquitous conduct and aims of ‘the Incendiaries of this Island.’ Dunmore now suspended the operation of the General Court, thus circumventing the legal proceedings against both Matson and the Receiver General. Convinced that his opponents would ‘stick at nothing to attain their ends, which... are of the darkest nature’, he implored London to allow him implement martial law.¹⁶

In May 1788, reports reached Nassau from the settlement of Spencer’s Bight on Abaco that ‘a Number of Negroes, were lying out in the Woods... many of whom are armed and have committed various depredations... some claiming their freedom.’¹⁷ Dunmore wasted no time in asserting his undimmed personal resolve to investigate the legitimacy of such claims to freedom. With the Receiver General too ill

¹⁴ Wylly to Stokes, Rye, Sussex, 6 July 1789, CO23/29/219–222; Affidavit of William Wylly, Nassau, 2 April 1789, CO23/27/139–40; Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 21 April 1788, CO23/27/131–2; Wylly to Menzies, Nassau, 31 March 1788, CO23/29/237; Affidavit of John Matson, Nassau, 1 April 1788, CO23/27/134; Warrant for Wylly’s arrest, 1 April 1788, CO23/27/135; Proceedings of the General Court, Nassau, 2 April 1788, CO23/27/137; General Court Minutes, 2 April 1788, BDA, S.C.1/2; Johnston to Menzies, Nassau, 3 April 1788, CO23/29/240; Wylly to Stokes, Rye, Sussex, 10 July 1789, CO23/29/226 (‘Myrmidons of Bow Street’). Johnston, originally from Charleston, had figured prominently in the Loyalist agitation against Maxwell. As well as practising law, he owned a plantation on Cat Island. See Sabine, *Biographical Sketches*, 441; *Bahama Gazette*, 3 June 1786.

¹⁵ Letter from Wylly, 3 April 1788, *Bahama Gazette*, 5 April 1788 (at CO23/31/246); Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 21 April 1788, CO23/27/131; Edwards to Dunmore, Nassau, 18 April 1788, CO23/27/144–5 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶ Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 8 April 1788, CO23/27/122; ‘An Account of the present Situation of Affairs in the Bahama Islands’, c. 1788, CO23/28/156; Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 21 April 1788, CO23/27/156–7.

¹⁷ Journals of the Council, 20 May 1788, CO23/28/26.

to travel, Dunmore went to Abaco himself, and with the authority of a special commission from the colonial Council, adjudicated the cases of thirty of the Abaco runaways himself.¹⁸

As discussed above, precisely what happened at Spencer's Bight, and why, is impossible to establish with certainty.¹⁹ If it really 'had been judged expedient to kick up among the Negroes' some kind of rebellion or disorder, Abaco was certainly the place to do it, and the behaviour of the crew of Dunmore's schooner was undoubtedly provocative. But Wylly, our main source, was careful to avoid an explicit claim that Dunmore had personally instigated the affair, while leaving his audience in no doubt as to what he meant. The only evidence we have from an actual participant is very circumspect. Richard Pearis said only that Dunmore's men had 'spread such Confusion among our Negroes', who claimed to their masters that captain Mackay 'told them he had the Governor's Authority to carry them to Nassau, and that all the Rebel Property Negroes would be made free.' All of this sounds notably reminiscent of the way that African Americans had behaved during the American Revolution. Then, as discussed in chapter one, slaves exaggerated and probably wilfully misinterpreted reports of British emancipatory designs to serve their own purposes, often in ways that then gave retrospective credence to rumours of 'instigated insurrections'.²⁰

Ultimately, it mattered relatively little whether or not the more shocking rumours were true, or that Dunmore supposedly decided that all but one of the thirty were legitimately enslaved, or even that the Spencer's Bight planters themselves thanked him for 'the fair, candid, and impartial, Trial which has been Afforded to our Runaway Slaves, and the quiet and peaceful Restoration of most of them to their Lawfull Owners.'²¹ From a more general slaveholding perspective, the Abaco blacks were rebels and outlaws, with a history of insurrectionary activity stretching back several years. The proper role of the colonial state was to crush them with all the force at its disposal, without mercy or hesitation. For the governor instead to acknowledge the possibility of their having acted out of legitimate grievances, and to offer even a façade of legal protection and due process, was quite outrageous enough.

¹⁸ Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 18 July 1788, CO23/27/164–5; Wylly, *Short Account*, 22.

¹⁹ See pp. 7–11 above.

²⁰ See pp. 57–64 above.

²¹ Wylly, *Short Account*, 22; Letter to Dunmore, Spencer's Bight, 2 June 1788, CO23/27/168–9.

Henceforth, there could be no prospect of reconciliation with Dunmore's governorship for many Loyalist slaveholders. Although continuing to seek the dissolution that might establish a Loyalist majority in the Assembly, they would be ultimately satisfied only by the governor's recall. Furthermore, in Wylly, the Loyalists now possessed an articulate and legally proficient spokesman who had become one of Dunmore's most implacable enemies. During the summer of 1788, Wylly collected signatures for a memorial addressed directly to Prime Minister William Pitt, that declared the Bahamas to be 'oppressed by all the evils of a bad Administration', and subjected to 'impolitic and oppressive laws.' It went on to assert that

under colour of Law, our Slaves, the principal property in this Country are daily seduced and harboured from their Masters,... and that a Rebellion among these people must soon be a Necessary consequence of the indecent manner in which they are supported against their lawfull owners.²²

In the following years, Bahamian Grand Juries would similarly present 'as a most alarming Grievance the Existence of an Act of the Legislature of this Country which authorises three Justices to determine on the Claims of People of Colour to Freedom.' A succession of Grand Jurors complained that in dispensing with the operation of a jury, the 1788 Act was 'subversive of the rights of British Subjects, and contrary to the spirit of our happy Constitution.' It was further alleged that as a consequence, 'negroes are encouraged to elope from their masters under pretended claims of freedom.' The 1791 Grand Jury initially opted for high-minded language, whose legalistic obliqueness perhaps sounded a somewhat defensive note, when it identified 'a direct Tendency to deprive the Subject of what is declared Property by the Colonial Customs and Laws, and considered as such by the various Laws of the Mother Country without a Trial by Jury.' As if belatedly concerned that their subtlety had been excessive, they concluded by bluntly declaring that 'We mean *Negro Property*.'²³

²² Memorial to Pitt, n.d., enclosure in Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 18 July 1788, CO23/27/170.

²³ Presentments of the Grand Jurors, 28 May 1788; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 24 February 1789, BDA, S.C. 1/2; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 25 February 1791, BDA, S.C. 1/4 (emphasis in original).

Wylly went to England towards the end of 1788 to deliver the memorial to Pitt, and spent much of the following year lobbying the government, London commercial interests, and Bahamian colonial agent Anthony Stokes. In the course of a series of letters, memorials, and his 1789 pamphlet, *A Short Account of the Bahama Islands*, Wylly elaborated by far the most comprehensive statement of Loyalist grievances against Dunmore's governorship. Wylly's extensive and wide-ranging critique of the 'negro court' deserves close attention, as it clearly illustrates both why that institution so antagonised Loyalist slaveholders, and the degree to which it was perceived as a dangerous departure from 'Colonial Customs and Laws.'

In part, Wylly questioned the legal propriety of the court, asserting that the presiding magistrates 'proceed upon no established principles; and that their practice is governed by no certain or known rules.' The trials, he claimed, were 'in every respect of the most summary kind, – seldom taking up more than an hour or two', and were notable for accepting evidence amounting to 'a mockery of proof.' He further echoed the Grand Jurors' complaint that 'by this Law, the Trial by Jury is unnecessarily and wantonly taken from the subject.'²⁴

However, Wylly did not shy from addressing the substantive issue involved: that, 'under colour of this law, the Planter has... been robbed of his property, by arbitrary decisions.' He was prepared to concede that 'that many Negroes... conveyed to the Bahama's... are now held in slavery by People who have no right to them.' Nonetheless, he insisted that, in Bahamian and British law, 'Negroes and certain other people of Colour, are declared to be *Slaves* and are *prima facie* to be considered as such.' Thus, it was very much 'contrary to this established rule of Colonial Law' even to allow the enslaved to initiate legal proceedings of any sort against their masters. The most alarming innovation was that 'the Justices, upon these Trials, begin with putting the Owner or Claimant to prove his Title (a thing which is often... impracticable)... in which if he fails the Negroe is of course declared free.' Wylly argued that the Assembly, in approving such legislation, had effectively 'ventured to declare all Negroes free, who at any time during the Rebellion in America found means to escape from their Owners, and get within the British Lines.'²⁵

²⁴ Wylly to Nepean, Rye, Sussex, 27 September 1789, CO23/29/261, 276; Wylly, *Short Account*, 21.

²⁵ Wylly, *Short Account*, 22; Wylly to Nepean, Rye, Sussex, 27 September 1789, CO23/29/273–6 (Wylly's emphasis).

Still more than this, however, the 1788 Act could be construed as a threat to the fundamentals of slave law. In placing the burden of proof of enslavement so firmly upon masters, it strongly implied the principle that *any slave might* be free, and in some respects should be presumed so until it could be proved otherwise. Hence, those who were notionally mere chattels were anomalously empowered to confront their owners in a court of law (and, in another departure from established norms, to testify against them). Many years later, Bahamian slaveholders would vociferously insist that, were slaves generally permitted to bear witness against their masters, ‘in less than twelve months, there would be no Slavery to ameliorate, not a single Slave to enfranchise, within the range of the West Indies.’²⁶

This was happening, moreover, at a moment when slaveholding interests in the English-speaking world seemed very much on the defensive. In Britain, abolitionism had gained momentum and support with startling speed since the foundation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787. In August 1789, the *Bahama Gazette* carried a special supplement covering the parliamentary debate on the slave trade, where Loyalists could read that Wilberforce had delivered ‘one of the most animated, perspicuous, methodical and ably argued speeches ever heard on a copious and comprehensive subject.’²⁷ It was no secret that in societies with slaves, judicial decisions might so undermine the legal basis of slavery as to render the institution untenable. The Mansfield judgement had effectively done this in England, and the 1780s saw similar rulings in Massachusetts and New Hampshire; by the end of the decade it seemed that the end of slavery in the United States north of the Mason-Dixon line was only a matter of time.²⁸

Even if, as Wylly assumed, ‘it would be absurd to expect much wisdom’ from a legislature without ‘any man of respectable property’, it is hard to believe that the members of the Assembly had placed such a construction upon the bill they had passed in 1788. In any case, Wylly had no doubt as to the real culprit: Lord Dunmore, a man he characterised as being ‘obstinate and violent by nature; of a capacity below mediocrity, and little cultivated by education; ignorant of the Constitution of England,

²⁶ *Official Letter*, 35. See also Natalie Zacek, ‘Voices and Silences: the Problem of Slave Testimony in the English West Indian Law Court’, *Slavery and Abolition*, 24:3 (December 2003), 24–39.

²⁷ *Bahama Gazette*, 1 August 1789; Blackburn, *Overthrow*, 133–45; Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery*, 67–78; Drescher, *Abolition*, 212–8.

²⁸ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 228–55; Blackburn, *Overthrow*, 117–21.

and of the Rights of British subjects.’²⁹ Wylly left room for some ambiguity in his assessment of the governor’s motivation. He repeatedly alluded to ‘shameful purposes’, including allegations of outright corruption, but also acknowledged the possibility that Dunmore had ‘proceeded from the purest motives of humanity towards the Negroes.’³⁰ Regardless of the reasons, Wylly was certain that ‘Lord Dunmore’s personal interference’ had been central to an intensified process of judicial manumission in the Bahamas. He claimed that ‘the trials depend for the most part upon the Governor’s pleasure.’ It could ‘not be doubted’ that Dunmore’s involvement ‘had a manifest tendency to influence the Magistrates... Many Negroes have accordingly been declared free upon the most frivolous evidence.’ In Wylly’s account of the Abaco affair, Dunmore, in response to the slaves ‘*having taken up arms*’, had presided over ‘a Court *illegally* constituted, and gave a general invitation to the Negroes to come in and claim their freedom.’³¹

For Loyalist slaveholders such as Wylly, among the most worrying consequences of Dunmore’s policy was its effect on black Bahamians, and especially African-American émigrés, who were supposedly quick to exploit the opportunity it presented to renegotiate their ambiguous post-Revolutionary status in their favour. Like the Grand Jurors, Wylly contended that it had now become ‘the simplest thing in the world, for a Negroe to elope from the service of his master, claim his freedom, go next day to trial, and obtain a decision in his favour.’ But the issue was not simply the ability of individual non-whites to obtain freedom, but rather, the degree to which ‘much confusion [had] been excited by this Act among a host of the Slaves in the Bahama Islands.’ In the first instance, the result of this confusion was that ‘every Negroe in the Bahama’s now thinks himself entitled to his freedom, who happened at any period of the War to be employed about any of the works or departments of our Army.’ Most alarming of all, however, was Wylly’s assertion that ‘the Slaves in the Bahama Islands (who greatly outnumber the whites) encouraged by this Act, by this Court, by Proclamations, and by other means, have broke out into some Acts of open rebellion.’³²

²⁹ Wylly, *Short Account*, 17, 22.

³⁰ Wylly, *Short Account*, 21; Wylly to Nepean, Rye, Sussex, 27 September 1789, CO23/29/262.

³¹ Wylly to Nepean, Rye, Sussex, 27 September 1789, CO23/29/261–2; Wylly, *Short Account*, 22–3 (Wylly’s emphasis).

³² Wylly to Nepean, Rye, Sussex, 27 September 1789, CO23/29/274–5; Wylly, *Short Account*, 22.

As we saw in chapter three, the suggestion that a previously quiescent slave population was inflamed by Dunmore lacks credibility. But Wylly's exposition of Loyalist grievances clearly indicates the multiple levels on which Dunmore and his project of state-sponsored manumission were perceived to threaten the security of slave property in the Bahamas. The 'negro court' posed an immediate problem for the many individual Loyalists who held African-American émigrés as slaves on the basis of tenuous claims of ownership. The legislation on which the court's existence rested was, at the very least, anomalous when set against the principles of the larger legal framework underpinning racial slavery. The governor's conduct threatened to make an already troublesome slave population still more assertive, and might ultimately pose concerns for the physical security of the regime.

In terms of mounting an effective challenge to Dunmore's policy, however, Wylly's efforts largely proved to be in vain. Secretary of State Lord Sydney demanded an explanation of Wylly's charges in December 1788. By the time Dunmore's twenty-five page reply reached London the following August, Sydney had himself been replaced by William Wyndham Grenville. During April and May 1789, the London *Times* had stated with increasing confidence that 'Lord Dunmore will be immediately recalled to answer the charges exhibited against him', but the basis of these reports is unclear; their source may well have been Wylly himself.³³ It has been suggested that only 'the intercession of Anthony Stokes, colonial agent for the Bahamas, saved Lord Dunmore's position,' but nothing indicates that London ever seriously contemplated recalling Dunmore in 1789. Grenville merely acknowledged receipt of the governor's answers to Wylly's accusations without further comment in September. Wylly himself left England for the Bahamas towards the end of February 1790 with his mission incomplete.³⁴

However, while Wylly was making his apparently fruitless representations to the Secretary of State, what was ultimately to prove a far more dangerous challenge to Dunmore was taking shape from within the House of Assembly. Ever since the

³³ Sydney to Dunmore, London, 24 December 1788, CO23/28/59–60; Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 29 June 1789, CO23/29/117–42; *The Times*, 11 April 1789, 2 May 1789, 18 May 1789. The 18 May edition stated that 'Lord Dunmore certainly comes home.' On 10 December 1788, the *Times* reported that 'a Gentleman from the Bahamas is... in town, sent over at the expence of the principal planters and merchants, for the express purpose of stating to the Ministry a variety of abuses which prevail in the Government of that colony.'

³⁴ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:202; Grenville to Dunmore, London, 17 September 1789, CO23/29/159; Wylly to Nepean, 18 February 1790, CO23/30/338.

bitterly contested general election of 1784–5 had failed to produce a Loyalist majority, the latter had complained loudly of ‘the present rotten and unconstitutional majority in the Assembly’, refusing to take their seats and demanding a fresh dissolution. But by the time of Dunmore’s arrival as governor, many Loyalists were reconsidering their initial decision to boycott the legislature, and a series of by-elections over the following years saw a growing number of émigré members returned to the Assembly.³⁵ In 1789, the Assembly was already some way from being the ‘duped and enslaved’ bulwark of ‘a most oppressive and contemptible oligarchy’ described by Wylly.³⁶

The struggle between Dunmore and the Assembly during the 1790s has already received substantial attention in Bahamian historiography. Their dispute turned upon several issues, and was to some extent simply a conventional colonial clash over the demarcation of powers between a legislature of elected representatives and a governor who could never be accused of much sympathy for democracy.³⁷ What has been hitherto unrecognised, however, is the extent to which the conflict was driven by the Assembly’s dim view of Dunmore’s self-appointed role as champion of state-sponsored manumission in the Bahamas.

A commission appointed by the Assembly to inspect the Receiver General’s record books voiced its concern to the House in March 1789 regarding the ‘Charge in the Publick Accounts amounting to upwards of £400 incurred for the trial of the freedom of Negroes.’ The commissioners professed their alarm at this ‘continued extraordinary and unnecessary expense’, although the Assembly had predictably fewer reservations regarding the £60 payments frequently made to slaveholders as compensation for slaves who were executed or transported. Rather, their real grievance was that the ‘expense incurred has been without the smallest advantage to the Publick,’ the benefits thereof being confined to those beyond the racial frontier of civil society. In terms increasingly distant from the commission’s ostensible remit, they added that ‘the Powers and Authorities given the Court for the trial of Negroes freedom was so unlimited that the most valuable Property of the Inhabitants of these Islands is absolutely at their Disposal’, and further opined ‘that therefore... nothing

³⁵ *Bahama Gazette*, 2 April 1785; Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 168–70.

³⁶ Wylly, *Short Account*, 15.

³⁷ See for instance Peters, ‘American Loyalists and the Plantation Period’, 95–108; Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 173–6; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:199–203.

can render the continuance of the Law establishing such Court in anywise expedient.’³⁸

In April, the Assembly passed a bill suspending the 1788 Act, only to be somewhat brusquely informed a few weeks later that the Council had rejected the measure.³⁹ Such direct challenges had little prospect of success while the upper chamber was largely composed of individuals drawn from the ‘vortex of Characters’ that ‘His Lordship has collected... about him, whose opinions and whose fiats seem to be regulated by his will and pleasure.’⁴⁰ The Council had no more hesitation in disposing of subsequent suspension bills sent up by the Assembly in June 1791 and July 1792.⁴¹

However, although these attempts to repeal the 1788 Act thereby met with frustration, the Assembly enjoyed greater success in curtailing the proceedings of the ‘negro court’ by restricting the funding of the ‘extraordinary and unnecessary expense’ of sixty-four shillings that was payable to the Receiver-General and magistrates for each case heard. For most of his governorship, Dunmore periodically authorised these payments with the rest of the public accounts in the sessions of the Executive Council. The sums involved, never amounting to more than £30 at a time, and usually rather less, hardly represented an enormous drain on the treasury, but they presumably did (and were intended to) provide an incentive for the recipients to process as many claims to freedom as possible.⁴²

In June 1789, the Council returned the annual Revenue Bill to the House, with the observation that ‘the Clause... wherein the allowances to Justices &c. sitting on the Trial of Negroes... is altered, it is conceived does not correspond with the Title of

³⁸ Journals of the General Assembly, 6 March 1789, CO23/30/25.

³⁹ Journals of the General Assembly, 2 April 1789, 28 April 1789, CO23/30/44, 61.

⁴⁰ Chrystie to Dundas, Nassau, 22 June 1794, CO23/33/106. Adam Chrystie, Colonial Secretary of the Bahamas from 1790, had lost all respect for Dunmore’s irregular style of government by 1794, but he had no more sympathy for the Governor’s Loyalist enemies. Wylly described the Council in 1789 as a collection of ‘destitute Bankrupts and habitual Drunkards of the lowest description’: *Short Account*, 17.

⁴¹ *The Journals of the General Assembly of the Bahama Islands from the 7th June, 1791 to the 29th September, 1794* (Nassau, 1913) (cited hereafter as *Journals 1791–4*), 8th Session, 14 June 1791, 13, 10th Session, 26 July 1792, 30.

⁴² Copies of the accounts passed by the Council were only sporadically forwarded to London, but for examples see CO23/28/15, CO23/29/28, CO23/32/83–6, and CO23/33/29–32.

the Bill.’ After a division, the Assembly refused to retract this clause, and the bill received Dunmore’s assent a few days later.⁴³

The 1791 Revenue Bill would again include ‘several clauses regulating the conduct of the Receiver General and his Deputies.’ But this measure went considerably further, with the Assembly now determined to assert

the undoubted and sole right of this House as the Representatives of the people sanctioned by Parliamentary usage to direct[,] limit and appoint in such Bills the purposes[,] considerations[,] limitations and qualifications of such Grants and sums of Money.⁴⁴

The success of this Bill would see the Assembly ‘assume... to itself, when sitting, the sole power of “Ascertaining, Adjusting, and paying Accounts and demands against the Public”’, and of appointing a Committee wielding similar authority at other times.⁴⁵ Given the House’s established attitude to the ‘negro court’, such a fiscal straitjacket would probably mean the termination of funding for that institution.

Attacking the court through the terms of the Revenue Bill was potentially a very potent strategy. The well-established colonial and British precedents regarding ‘money bills’ offered a way around the upper chamber’s veto over other legislation. The Assembly could be far more confident of presenting a relatively united front in a dispute with the governor and Council over the Assembly’s prerogative on such legislation. Members who might be ambivalent regarding repeal of the 1788 Act would find it much harder to remain neutral regarding what was easily represented as the defence of ‘the best and most sacred Interests of themselves and constituents’ against the arrogance of executive power.⁴⁶

By stubbornly resisting the Assembly’s initial attempts at direct repeal, Dunmore and the Council had helped to escalate their differences with the House into a larger constitutional battle over the distribution of authority between executive and legislature. The Council found the 1791 Revenue Bill ‘subversive of a Government

⁴³ Journals of the General Assembly, 17–26 June 1789, CO23/30/88–93.

⁴⁴ Journals of the Council, 19 October 1791, CO23/31/57; *Journals 1791–4*, 9th session, 20 October 1791, 22.

⁴⁵ Journals of the Council, 19 October 1791, CO23/31/56.

⁴⁶ *Journals 1791–4*, 9th session, 20 October 1791, 24.

founded on Monarchical principles’, a measure that would effectively ‘wrest from the Crown all the efficient powers of Government’, and ‘almost entirely annul all responsibility in the King’s Representative, and the persons acting under his immediate authority.’⁴⁷ With the House resolving that even to enter into debate regarding the Council’s objections ‘might appear a Diminution of those Inherent Rights from which the General Assembly will never recede’, neither side appeared willing to countenance any sort of compromise over the issues at stake.⁴⁸

For Dunmore, who in the midst of the crisis had also to contend with ‘a severe fit of Sickness’, the prospects were not encouraging.⁴⁹ By repeatedly proroguing the Assembly, he dragged the impasse on until the summer of 1792, but with funds drying up, it was clear that the deadlock could not continue indefinitely. In his speech opening the July 1792 session, Dunmore noted ‘the bad consequences that have ensued... from the want of an efficient Revenue’, and warned that ‘any further extension of them must multiply the distress of the Inhabitants, and abridge the constitutional functions of Government.’⁵⁰ He resorted to presenting the House with an extract of a letter from Henry Dundas, by then Secretary of State, heavily edited so as to indicate unequivocal support for the governor and Council’s position. The only result of this rather dubious stratagem was to earn Dunmore a stinging rebuke from Dundas when the latter received word of it.⁵¹ The governor’s only alternative was a dissolution of the Assembly, a step he had consistently resisted since his arrival; if anything, a general election threatened to return an even more hostile legislature. On 3 August, Dunmore finally conceded defeat, informing the House that ‘I shall give my Assent to this [Revenue] Bill from a thorough knowledge of the Great evils and discredit the want of one for so long a period has thrown upon this Country.’ But he continued to insist that the Bill ‘contains Clauses dissonant to His Majesty’s Instructions’, and ended with a defiant note, warning that those instructions ‘will in future invariably be my Guide be the Consequences what it may.’⁵²

⁴⁷ Journals of the Council, 19 October 1791, CO23/31/56.

⁴⁸ *Journals 1791–4*, 9th session, 20 October 1791, 25.

⁴⁹ Dunmore to Grenville, Nassau, 23 July 1791, CO23/31/40.

⁵⁰ *Journals 1791–4*, 10th session, 12 July 1792, 16.

⁵¹ *Journals 1791–4*, 10th session, 12 July 1792, 16–17; Dundas to Dunmore, London, 28 September 1792, CO23/31/141.

⁵² *Journals 1791–4*, 10th session, 3 August 1792, 41.

The Assembly would not meet again until July 1793, when they were unimpressed by their examination of the Treasurer's books on the 24th, noting with disapproval the 'many accounts... paid by the Treasurer for several contingencies which... were irregular.' The House resolved 'that the Treasurer be directed not to pay any such accounts in future until they are examined and passed by the General Assembly.' They singled out for criticism 'an overpayment made to Thomas Smith Esquire amounting to £120.' Although the nature of this 'overpayment' is not explicitly stated in the journal of the House, the only payments made to Smith in the public accounts paid by the Council were those for 'the Trial of Negroes.'⁵³

A month later, after Dunmore had already assented to a new Revenue Act, the Assembly passed 'An Act for the appropriation of certain sums of money... for and towards defraying the expences of this Government.'⁵⁴ When the Council refused to consider this measure without copies of the relevant vouchers and accounts, the House simply declared once more their 'undoubted and Sole right' to frame money bills, insisting that the latter 'ought not to be changed, altered or interfered with in any manner by the Council.' A personal demand from the governor for the accounts was met with a resolution that it was 'unsanctioned by Parliamentary usage and incompatible with the principles of the Constitution for the General Assembly to furnish Documents and Vouchers to other branches of the Legislature for the passing of Money Bills.'⁵⁵ Another brief standoff ensued, but the 'critical Situation of affairs' created by the outbreak of war with Revolutionary France made the need for revenue far more urgent than it had been in 1791–2.⁵⁶ Dunmore signed the Appropriation Bill on 16 September, and with it permanently yielded control of Bahamian public finances to the Assembly.⁵⁷

⁵³ *Journals 1791–4*, 11th session, 24 July 1793, 12–13; for instances of Smith's role in the 'negro court' see the trials of Henrietta Grant, 14 March 1788; Matthias, 1 February 1788; Quash, 3 January 1788, RGD, Registry Office Book N, ff. 293, 291, 228. A Loyalist veteran from Connecticut, Smith was a supporter of Governor Maxwell earlier in the 1780s; see Sabine, *Biographical Sketches*, 804; Parrish, 'Records', 38.

⁵⁴ *Journals 1791–4*, 11th session, 21 August 1793, 39.

⁵⁵ *Journals 1791–4*, 11th session, 23–30 August 1793, 51–6.

⁵⁶ *Journals 1791–4*, 12th session, 10 September 1793, 2.

⁵⁷ *Journals 1791–4*, 12th session, 16 September 1793, 12; Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 176.

II: 'Every Negroe in the Bahamas now thinks himself entitled to his freedom': State Manumission under Dunmore

Historians of the Bahamas have generally been every bit as scathing as their American colleagues in their interpretation of the fourth earl of Dunmore. He has been variously described as 'a hot-headed and licentious boor' who was 'outstandingly inept' as well as 'narrow-minded, indiscreet, obstinate and violent'. Dunmore's 'methods were illegal', and moreover 'motivated solely by greed'.⁵⁸ The substantive charge sheet against him includes accusations of 'shamelessly exercising patronage', 'speculating in land', and an 'obsession with building new forts'. The latter is said to have driven his 'demands for extraordinary expenditures', that had the effect of 'uniting all local whites in a party against his government.'⁵⁹ In short, he was probably 'the worst governor the islands ever had.'⁶⁰

The 'negro court' has rarely, if ever, been the subject of detailed investigation, but in the context of this broader narrative, it has proved easy to regard it with cynicism. In a brief discussion of the Abaco affair, Sylvia Frey observes that although Dunmore was 'still posing as the Great Liberator', he was primarily 'anxious to lull the planters' fears and calm the growing racial tensions.'⁶¹ Craton and Saunders suggest, apparently with little supporting evidence, that the 'negro court' 'was seen by whites and blacks alike as a means of re-enslavement.'⁶²

The prevalence of such interpretations of both Dunmore and the court is, in one sense, a powerful testament to William Wylly's considerable gifts as an advocate and polemicist. But Wylly's case against the 'negro court' rested in part on his insistence that although accusations of re-enslavement by Loyalists 'may, in some very few instances, be true', reports that the practice was widespread had '*very little* foundation in fact'.⁶³ That Bahamian historiography has effectively tended to give

⁵⁸ Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 173 (first two quotations); Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 169.

⁵⁹ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:202–3, 200. The latter two points especially are highly questionable: Dunmore's fortification programme was hugely expensive, but was mainly paid for by the imperial government. Dunmore commanded a substantial base of support among white Bahamians up to, and even after his recall as Governor in 1796; see pp. 228–30 below.

⁶⁰ Johnson, *Race Relations*, 3.

⁶¹ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 186.

⁶² Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:187.

⁶³ Wylly, *Short Account*, 22 (my emphasis).

Wylly the benefit of the doubt on this cautiously imprecise claim reflects the degree to which the ambiguous de jure and de facto status of so many African-American émigrés has gone unnoticed. Likewise, some historians have uncritically echoed the allegation that slaves ‘in general’ had claimed their freedom only ‘*upon their being encouraged after several months absence from their owners, to be harboured and employed upon the plantation of Lord Dunmore*’.⁶⁴ Wylly produced precisely one example to substantiate this claim, and even here Dunmore could produce evidence that he had acted without impropriety.⁶⁵

The clinching point has usually been that, after all, of the 30 slaves tried at Spencer’s Bight, Dunmore ruled 29 to be slaves and restored them to their masters. This is presumably the basis of Craton and Saunders’ claim that ‘a large proportion of the cases went against the black claimants.’⁶⁶ Let us ignore for the moment that there is only Wylly’s word for this, and that in the absence of any record of the proceedings, nothing is known of the basis on which these 29 claimed their freedom.⁶⁷ The argument that that the ‘negro court’ actually functioned primarily as a mechanism for re-enslavement sits very awkwardly indeed with the other elements of Wylly’s critique, which have rarely been examined in detail: that this was a shocking violation of fundamental premises of colonial slave law at the expense of slaveholders’ property rights, and moreover, as a result, virtually every black émigré in the Bahamas ‘now thinks himself entitled to his freedom’.⁶⁸

The 1788 Act instituting the ‘negro court’ called for records of its proceedings to be entered into a book kept by the Receiver General. In 1789, the Assembly called for ‘the Commissioners appointed to preside on the Trials of Freedom of Negroes... to

⁶⁴ Wylly to Nepean, Rye, Sussex, 27 September 1789, CO23/29/261 (Wylly’s emphasis); see for instance Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 169.

⁶⁵ Memorial of Mary Brown to Sydney, (‘by her Attorney Wm. Wylly’) 15 November 1788, CO23/28/141–2; Affidavits of Edmund Wegg, 23 June 1789, & Seth Yeoman, Nassau, June 1789, CO23/29/126–9.

⁶⁶ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:200. Cf. Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 169–70, 175–6; Johnson, *Race Relations*, 70.

⁶⁷ Whoever these people were, they should not necessarily be identified with the free African Americans from New York, since Spencer’s Bight was settled from East Florida, partly by veterans of the King’s Carolina Rangers; see p. 104 above. However, other members of this unit certainly were involved in the re-enslavement of black émigrés in Nova Scotia; see Troxler, ‘Hidden from History’, 40–47.

⁶⁸ Wylly to Nepean, Rye, Sussex, 27 September 1789, CO23/29/276.

lay before this House the Book containing the Records of such Trials'.⁶⁹ The contents of this book would obviously help enormously to cut through the fog of partisan rhetoric and shed some clear light on what the court was actually doing. It is mentioned as being extant as recently as the 1960s, and Lydia Austin Parrish apparently quoted material from it.⁷⁰ Since then it seems to have disappeared. It is not in the Bahamian Department of Archives, or among the eighteenth-century record books still housed in the Registrar General's Department.

What do still exist are Bahamian manumission records. The best known source for eighteenth-century manumissions is a slim manuscript volume, currently preserved at the Department of Archives in Nassau, bearing the (modern) title, 'Register of Freed Slaves Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century.' This document provides a tabular list of freedpeople up to 1834, with dates of manumission, names of the persons responsible, a brief (usually a single word) description of how they were freed, and a source reference.

Unfortunately, many pages of the 'Register', roughly those covering names beginning with the letters G to R, are missing. Partly because of this, scholarship on Bahamian manumissions has largely focussed on the nineteenth century, where parallel information is available from the extensive documentation produced under the terms of the imperial Slave Registration Acts.⁷¹

Happily, however, there also exists in the Bahamian Archives, as an unlisted addendum to the contents of a reel of microfilm labelled 'Executive Council Minutes', a thirty-seven page document with the apparently contemporary title 'Negro Freedoms'. The front page of 'Negro Freedoms' bears the stamp of the old Nassau Public Record Office, but the document is not listed in the Department of Archives finding aids, and to my knowledge it has never been cited by any historian. In layout, 'Negro Freedoms' is very similar to the Register, and where their contents overlap chronologically, they are almost identical. It has the appearance of a rough draft or working copy, and contains no entries later than 1826. But, crucially, 'Negro Freedoms' seems to be complete for the time span that it covers; it enables the gaps in the 'Register of Freed Slaves' to be filled in.

⁶⁹ Journals of the General Assembly, 30 April 1789, CO23/30/67.

⁷⁰ Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 294; Parrish, 'Records', 116–7.

⁷¹ See especially Saunders, *Slavery in the Bahamas*, 68–77.

Almost every entry in these two sources has a reference to further documentation in the record books of the colonial Registry Office, from whose contents both the 'Register' and 'Negro Freedoms' were presumably compiled. Not all these books are extant or safe to handle; many entries in the manumission documents refer to the seemingly lost book of 'Trials' or 'Tryals' discussed above. Nonetheless, at least nine containing relevant material survive, either in the original or as microfilm copies made in the 1950s.⁷²

From the 'Register', 'Negro Freedoms' and the Registry Office Books, it is possible to identify a total of 451 individuals who were freed between 1782 and 1799.⁷³

The 'Register of Freed Slaves' includes summary reasons for the manumissions it lists, under the headings of 'by whom made free' and 'How' or 'Causes of freedom'. Some of this information is more or less self-explanatory; it seems reasonable to assume that the name of a private individual accompanied by 'Manumission', 'Bequest', or 'Last Will' indicates the freeing of a slave by an owner.⁷⁴ 'Negro Freedoms', a less clearly presented document generally, provides only a single explanatory column, that frequently contains merely a name. Collation of the more than 160 entries appearing in both documents indicates that this represents a 'normal' manumission.

However, for over two-fifths of the 211 entries from the 'Register' for 1782–99, 'Proclamation' is entered in the 'causes of freedom' heading, and expressions such as 'claim of Right', 'Military Service' and 'within Br[itish] Lines' also occur.⁷⁵ These manumissions by 'proclamation' are variously described in the 'by whom made free' heading as the actions of military officers and 'Commissioners of Claims', or as the result of 'Certificates' issued either by 'Justices' or (most commonly) the governor. Again, where individual entries from 'Negro Freedom' can be identified with those in the 'Register', these descriptions are duplicated, although the term 'proclamation' is

⁷² Registry Office Books M, O, V, W, E², D² and P² exist as originals. Book Z is microfilmed, and Book N is a handwritten (apparently twentieth century) copy of the original. All are in the RGD.

⁷³ See appendix for a collated table of this data.

⁷⁴ 'Register of Freed Slaves Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century', BDA.

⁷⁵ 'Register of Freed Slaves Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century', BDA. By my reckoning the total is 89; although, apparently using the same source, a total of 59 'slaves... manumitted by proclamation' from 1783 onwards is given in Johnson, *Race Relations*, 42. Although I counted from 1782, there is only one 'proclamation' entry for that year. Despite this discrepancy, the chronological distribution of these manumissions that Johnson notes is broadly consistent with the pattern described below.

often absent.⁷⁶ Combining all these categories, the state, in its various judicial, executive and military capacities, is described as being responsible for 237 of the 451 manumissions recorded from 1782–99.

Forty of these state manumissions are dated to the first part of this period, and where corresponding entries in the Registry Office Books can be traced, they are mostly copies of certificates of freedom issued outside the Bahamas. Presumably, therefore, as discussed in chapter three, such entries are not records of people freed in the Bahamas, but rather of newly arrived émigré African Americans who were registering their recently obtained legal freedom with the authorities.⁷⁷

The documentation available for the 54 manumissions ascribed to a ‘Certificate of Justices’, however, suggests that these were indeed usually African Americans who successfully claimed their freedom in the ‘negro court’. Jenny and her four children were declared free in 1786 on the basis of testimony from William Tebbs that ‘she took protection within the British Lines at Charleston... and that he saw her free pass signed by... Major Fraser Town Mayor of Charleston’.⁷⁸ Thomas Smith, ‘lately in the possession of Henry Wiles’, was found in 1787 to be ‘absolutely and to all intents and purposes free and acquitted... from all obligations of slavery or servitude.’⁷⁹ In 1788, the court declared that ‘a Negro Woman calling herself Sarah Moultrie’, who had belonged to the American general William Moultrie, was ‘not nor ever was the Slave or property of... John Martin’.⁸⁰

A few cases offer rather more detail, like that of James Green, ‘a Mulatto Man’ who was claimed as a slave by Richard Pearis in 1785. Green claimed to have served during the war first in the ‘Engineer Department’ and later in a cavalry unit, before going to St. Augustine, where, according to several witnesses ‘he was always considered as a free man’ and ‘was never claimed as a slave by any person’. In Florida, he signed on as a sailor aboard the *Whitby Warrior*, where his ‘free papers... were utterly defaced and destroyed by the water.’ Eventually, he joined Andrew Deveaux’s expedition against the Spanish, and so came to the Bahamas. Pearis did not

⁷⁶ ‘Negro Freedoms’, BDA.

⁷⁷ See p. 116 above.

⁷⁸ Registry Office Book N, RGD, f. 224.

⁷⁹ Registry Office Book N, RGD, f. 225.

⁸⁰ Registry Office Book O, RGD, ff. 7–8. There seem to have been at least two Loyalists of this name in the Bahamas; see Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 244, nn. 39, 48.

support his claim, and Green was pronounced ‘to all intents and purposes a *freeman*’.⁸¹

Of the 128 state manumissions listed for the years 1788–93, 95 are by ‘Governor’s Certificate’. Nearly half of them have corresponding Registry Office Book entries, but very few of them provide much detail. A typical example is the 1793 certificate issued to Abraham Collins, which states simply that ‘whereas it appears to me from good and sufficient Evidence that the bearer hereof Abraham Collins is a free Black Man. I do therefore certify and confirm the freedom of the said Abraham Collins.’⁸² What is notable, however, is that all are signed by Dunmore, and that the ‘Governor’s Certificate’ formulation occurs only three times for entries dated prior to 1788.

These documents are surely those that Dunmore was authorised to issue ‘under his Hand and Seal... to any Negro... adjudged to be Free... as a full proof of the freedom of the Negro’ by the terms of the 1788 Act.⁸³ Moreover, the chronological distribution of state manumissions of all categories is wholly consistent with the political trajectory outlined in section I. There were 128 in 1788–93, almost double the number in the preceding six year period, and three times the total from 1794–99. After 1793, when the Loyalist opposition finally wrested control of colonial finances from Dunmore, the level of state manumissions fell off dramatically: after an annual peak of 47 in 1793, just 8 are recorded for the following two years.

All of this was decidedly unusual. In most sites of Atlantic slavery, manumission was in the first instance a private matter. Owners made decisions to free enslaved people, most commonly the illegitimate children of slaveholders by enslaved women, but also other slaves for whom owners felt particular regard, affection or

⁸¹ Trial of James Green, 15 February 1785; Examination of James Green, New Providence, 14 December 1787, Registry Office Book N, RGD, ff. 291–2, 223–4 (emphasis in original).

⁸² Certificate of freedom for Abraham Collins, Nassau, 5 October 1793, RGD, Registry Office Book D², f. 176.

⁸³ ‘An Act for explaining and amending an Act passed in the Twenty Fourth Year of His present Majesty’s Reign, Intituled “An Act for governing Negroes, Mulattoes, Mustees and Indians, and for suspending several Acts therein mentioned”’, 28 Geo. III, 26 February 1788, CO23/29/16.

gratitude. Some societies also permitted slaves to purchase themselves from amenable masters, but manumission was normally the prerogative of individual slaveholders.⁸⁴

State intervention in this process primarily took the form of legal regulation, often designed to buttress the barrier between slavery and freedom with restrictions and limitations. This was the case with the 1768 Bahamian Manumission Act that required freed slaves to provide a £90 bond as security for their good behaviour and financial self-sufficiency.⁸⁵ Short of abolishing slavery itself, governments generally only emancipated individuals in unusual and relatively rare situations, for instance as a reward to slaves who betrayed insurrectionary conspiracies to the authorities. Within the British empire, the freeing of large numbers of slaves by the state occurred almost solely on grounds of military expediency or emergency.⁸⁶ Clearly, many African Americans in the Bahamas could lay a reasonable claim to ‘their freedom under the Proclamations issued by the Commanders in Chief of His Majesty’s forces in America during the late war’.⁸⁷ But in peacetime, nearly a decade after the war’s end, there was little or no precedent for government to liberate hundreds of people, ostensibly on grounds of principle. It seems clear that only the personal support of Dunmore made this possible. But this raises the question of why Dunmore was prepared to expend so much political capital in the interests of the enslaved, even at the cost of permanently alienating much of the white Bahamian elite, and eventually of surrendering a major slice of his executive authority. To answer this question, it is necessary to examine the figure of Dunmore in more detail.

⁸⁴ On manumission generally see Heuman, ‘Social Structure’, 143–51; Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, especially 29–50, 138–74; Handler, *Unappropriated People*, 30–41, 48–50; Rosemary Brana-Shute, ‘Approaching Freedom: The manumission of slaves in Suriname, 1760–1828’, *Slavery and Abolition*, 10:3 (December 1989), 40–63; T. Stephen Whitman, *The Price of Freedom: Slavery and manumission in Baltimore and early national Maryland* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997); Stanley Engerman, ‘Pricing Freedom: Evaluating the costs of emancipation and manumission’, in Shepherd, ed., *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom*, 273–302. For comparative data on rates of manumission in the British West Indies, see Higman, *Slave Populations*, 379–82, 689–92.

⁸⁵ Goveia, ‘West Indian Slave Laws’, 27–8; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:155; this law was probably also intended to discourage owners from freeing slaves unable to work, who would then become dependent on the colonial government for support.

⁸⁶ Aside from the American Revolution, the most notable instance of this was perhaps the 1807 Mutiny Act, which freed outright the 10,000 black soldiers of the West India regiments in order to frustrate the efforts of slaveholders to render these troops subject to the Caribbean slave codes; see Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 78–9.

⁸⁷ Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 4 March 1788, CO23/27/112.

III: Lord Dunmore as Liberator? Dunmore, Slavery and Empire

It is not hard to see why the judgement of history has not been kind to Dunmore. There seems little doubt that he was a haughty, arrogant individual who made enemies easily and often. His extravagance, overbearing manner and frequent disregard for strict constitutional and legal propriety arguably made him ill-suited to the roles of politician and administrator. An enthusiastic land speculator in both Virginia and the Bahamas, he certainly took full advantage of the potential that his governorships offered for patronage, nepotism and self-enrichment.⁸⁸

Dunmore has also suffered through his incompatibility with conventional historiographical boundaries. His life straddles a range of what are all too often still treated in practice as parallel but separate branches of historical inquiry: eighteenth-century British politics and the incorporation of the Scottish aristocracy, colonial New York and Virginia, the American Revolution, and finally the Bahamas. Consequently, even on the rare occasions when Dunmore has been deemed a worthwhile subject of study in his own right, such work has been tightly focused upon specific points in time and space, rather than the overall trajectory of his life and career.⁸⁹

This fragmentation of Dunmore's personal history has facilitated scholarly scepticism, not to say cynicism, as to his attitudes and motives. Considered, as they generally have been, as isolated and atypical or anomalous episodes, it can seem eminently reasonable to conclude that initiatives such as the Virginia proclamation and the Bahamian 'negro court' were of only limited significance in the story of a largely conventional and not especially interesting imperial official.

By considering Dunmore's imperial career as a distinctive trajectory in its own right, a particular attitude and approach to the situation of enslaved black people is

⁸⁸ John E. Selby, *Dunmore* (Williamsburg: Virginia Independence Bicentennial Commission, 1977), 11–14; J. Leitch Wright, jr., 'Lord Dunmore's Loyalist Asylum in the Floridas', *FHQ*, 49:4 (April 1971), 373–4; Chrystie to Dundas, Nassau, 22 June 1794, CO23/33/104–6; Chalmers to Portland, London, 25 December 1794, CO23/33/140–44.

⁸⁹ Such scholarship includes Selby, *Dunmore*; William C. Lowe, 'The Parliamentary Career of Lord Dunmore, 1761–1774', *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 96:1 (January 1988), 3–30. Since J. M. Rigg's 1894 entry in the original *Dictionary of National Biography* (now available at <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/olddnb.jsp?articleid=19631>>), the only attempts to present Dunmore's life as a whole have been two short articles by John E. Selby: 'Murray, John', *American National Biography Online* (OUP, 2000) <<http://www.anb.org/articles/01/01-00242.html>>; and 'Murray, John, fourth earl of Dunmore (1732–1809)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (OUP, 2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19631>> [all accessed 27 April 2006]. Both deal with Dunmore's time in the Bahamas in a single paragraph.

discernible, from both his sporadic remarks on the subject, and, above all, his actions.⁹⁰ In North America, as we saw in chapter one, he had been struck by the military possibilities inherent in Virginian slaves' desire 'to revenge themselves' as early as 1772. After exploring this potential in practice in 1775, he went on to formulate a plan for raising a new army of former slaves in the lower South that went far beyond what any Revolutionary War British commander had previously contemplated.⁹¹

In the Bahamas, complaining to London about the inadequacy of the regular garrison, he suggested that he might once more be 'obliged to Arm some Negroes'.⁹² He did manage to employ a small multi-racial force (in which non-whites and whites seem to have received the same pay) as the crew of his schooner, the *Shearwater*.⁹³ When not in use by the governor himself, this vessel was primarily employed in what was ostensibly an effort to control smuggling in the Out Islands. According to Wylly, 'the approach of so many *Algerine Rovers* could not have struck greater terror into the minds of the Inhabitants, than they were filled with when the Governor's *Cruizers* visited their defenceless Islands.'⁹⁴ On occasion, as at Spencer's Bight, these men cheerfully engaged in what looked very much like a deliberate effort to subvert master-slave relations.

In each of these examples, Dunmore's principal concern was to address problems of imperial governance, from the fundamental crisis of the American rebellion to the comparatively trivial irritant of illegal trade in the Bahamas. To some degree, his support for state manumission can also be understood in this light, as a pragmatic response to the mounting disorder and violence in Nassau and at Abaco. With just four depleted regular companies to garrison the whole colony, the coercive

⁹⁰ For a discussion of how the exposition of individual imperial careers can illuminate 'multiple and continually fragmenting and reconstituting imperial networks', and the extent to which 'colonial governance was... often a relative and comparative endeavour' see Lambert & Lester, 'Introduction. Imperial Spaces, Imperial Subjects', in *Imperial careering*, 1–31(quotations at 10–11).

⁹¹ See pp. 60–61, 64–70, 75–6 above.

⁹² Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 4 June 1789, CO23/29/106.

⁹³ Estimates for operating costs of the *Shearwater*, enclosure in Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 20 November 1787, CO23/27/83.

⁹⁴ Wylly, *Short Account*, 23 (Wylly's emphasis).

options for dealing with ‘the daring behaviour of the Negroes’ – and of men like John Tattall – were limited.⁹⁵

But Dunmore’s solutions to these problems consistently involved an impulse to mobilise black people in the service of the empire, on a voluntary and reciprocal basis, entailing obligations on his part that he took at least as seriously as had Guy Carleton in New York. He tried to identify points at which imperial and black interests and aspirations might coincide, and where cooperation might be to their mutual advantage.

Most obviously, Dunmore grasped the potential of appealing to aspirations to freedom; in Virginia, the ‘Ethiopian Regiment’ wore the motto ‘Liberty to Slaves’ on their uniforms. In South Carolina, Dunmore stressed the necessity of an unequivocal promise of eventual freedom to slaves who joined the proposed new black regiments. Moreover, in his use of black people, Dunmore repeatedly found it expedient to ‘encourage them to revenge themselves’ via roles entailing direct confrontation with slaveholders. The rebellion of the Southern plantocrats was to be crushed by African-American soldiers. In the Bahamas, Richard Pearis was subjected to the humiliation of watching helplessly as the ‘armed Negroes’ from the *Shearwater* took over his plantation and seized his property, while his guests and house slaves looked on.

Hints of sympathy for the enslaved can also be discerned in Dunmore’s answers to the Parliamentary enquiry into slavery of 1788–9. He reported with apparent satisfaction that slaves in the Bahamas enjoyed the same life expectancy as whites, and that the slave population’s ‘Natural increase in these Islands is at least equal to that of the whites’, with a ‘nearly equal’ ratio of males to females among the enslaved. He further stated that Bahamian slaves were not subjected to any labour that whites were ‘constitutionally’ incapable of undertaking, adding pointedly that ‘we grow no sugar and *I hope we never will.*’ The image of slavery in the islands presented by Dunmore in this document was somewhat rose-tinted, as in his claim that enslaved Bahamians ‘are in general taken very good care of by their Masters whose interest it is to do so’.⁹⁶ But he clearly found the Bahamian version of slavery more palatable than

⁹⁵ McArthur to Sydney, Nassau, 27 November 1787, CO23/27/74; Sydney to Dunmore, London, 4 March 1789, CO23/29/55.

⁹⁶ ‘Answers to heads of Inquiry relative to Negroe Slaves in the Bahama Islands’, enclosure in Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 30 July 1788, CO23/28/31–7 (my emphasis).

the ruthless exploitation of the enslaved in the plantation societies, and especially in the sugar islands.

To be sure, there is nothing to suggest that Dunmore ever envisaged an end to slavery as an institution, and still less anything resembling racial equality. In Virginia, he owned dozens of slaves, and would buy more on coming to the Bahamas.⁹⁷ He expressed little interest in the British abolitionist movement, let alone support for it, except to report that it had made no discernible impression on Bahamian slaves.⁹⁸ But he apparently did believe that blackness and bondage need not necessarily be synonymous. Any number of individual non-whites might demonstrate that they were worthy of freedom. Moreover, it should be entirely within the prerogative of the state, both to dispense such freedom, and to determine who was to be entitled to it. As we have seen, Dunmore had few qualms over violating the sanctity of property rights, at least in human beings.

At one level, this was a distinctly personal approach to black people. No other eighteenth-century royal governor displayed such a sustained enthusiasm for arming slaves, and still less for freeing them in peacetime. A parallel might be drawn with the Superintendent of Honduras, Colonel Edward Despard, who, like Dunmore, antagonised a local elite by championing the interests of poor black and coloured people in an obscure outpost of empire during the 1780s. But it would be misleading to think of Dunmore as a maverick figure in the sense that Despard undoubtedly was. In 1790, Despard's egalitarian land distribution scheme cost him his job in Honduras.⁹⁹ In contrast, and despite the fervent lobbying by Wyllly and others, London never criticised Dunmore for his manumission policy (though he was censured with increasing severity by successive Secretaries of State for a wide range of other transgressions). Rather, Lord Sydney went so far as to advise him in 1788 that

the Measures you have pursued... for affording Protection to such [African Americans] as may have been unjustifiably deprived of the Freedom they

⁹⁷ Selby, *Dunmore*, 69; Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 181; a receipt for Dunmore's purchase of 20 slaves for £600 sterling in November 1787 is at Registry Office Book N, RGD, f. 309.

⁹⁸ Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 30 July 1788, CO23/28/29.

⁹⁹ A concise discussion of Despard's life and career, emphasising his radicalism, appears in Linebaugh & Rediker, *Many-headed Hydra*, 248–86.

had acquired from their Services during the War in America, meets with His Majesty's Royal approbation.¹⁰⁰

In most respects, Dunmore's career as soldier, politician and governor seems to have been thoroughly conventional. Whereas Despard would be hanged and beheaded as a traitor in 1803 for his part in a revolutionary republican conspiracy, Dunmore sat in the House of Lords for nearly thirty years.¹⁰¹ John Selby has observed of his conduct in Virginia during the 1770s that 'fundamentally, there was no difference between his attitude and London's. It was his kind of people who then ruled the British Empire.'¹⁰² Dunmore was very much within the orbit of mainstream British thought and practice regarding empire, and it is there that we must look to make sense of his apparent unorthodoxy regarding slavery.

The idea of the 'mainstream' calls for qualification, insofar as even the notion of an overall British imperial policy was only just beginning to emerge in the later eighteenth century. With metropolitan oversight of the colonies diffused across a bewildering array of agencies and officials, whose responsibilities and jurisdictions were not necessarily demarcated in any very clear or rational manner, much depended in practice upon local initiatives. For the most part, imperial 'policy', not unlike the empire itself, amounted to a piecemeal assemblage of ad hoc solutions to specific problems, devised by people who commonly 'had no coherent philosophy of empire', or even much sense of how their actions fitted into a larger 'imperial system.'¹⁰³

Nonetheless, it is possible to trace the development of distinct patterns of ideas and assumptions within this mosaic. As we saw in chapter one, one such current was the conception of paternalistic imperial subjectship that increasingly informed the governance of non-British peoples from the 1760s onwards. This 'discourse of colonial governmentality' was reflected by the various initiatives designed to both

¹⁰⁰ Sydney to Dunmore, London, 21 June 1788, CO23/27/124.

¹⁰¹ Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 248–54, 272–86; Selby, 'Murray, John', *American National Biography*; Lowe, 'Parliamentary Career', 3–30.

¹⁰² Selby, *Dunmore*, 4.

¹⁰³ Bowen, 'British Conceptions of Global Empire', 10–11; Marshall, 'Eighteenth-Century Empire', 186, 192; Marshall, 'Britain and the World', 10–11; Steele, 'Governance', 105–117; Lambert & Lester, 'Imperial Spaces, Imperial Subjects', 8–13.

protect the interests of such peoples, and to more effectively incorporate them within the empire as loyal and useful subjects of the crown.¹⁰⁴

A parallel tendency was the drive to strengthen metropolitan power and control over the empire, manifested in measures such as the novel initiatives in the direct rule of overseas territories, assertions of parliamentary sovereignty over the colonies, and efforts to curb the autonomy of the existing colonial assemblies. The conjunction of these two trends had potentially profound ramifications for the position of slavery within the empire. They informed the proposals for gradual emancipation formulated by people such as Maurice Morgann and James Ramsay, and the early antislavery activism of Granville Sharp. They also provided a frame of reference for the British soldiers, officials and politicians who contemplated the subversion of North American slavery during the Revolutionary War, and later for many of the early leaders of the British abolitionist movement.¹⁰⁵

Although there is no firm evidence that Dunmore was familiar with either the texts or the authors of the early antislavery schemes of the 1760s and 1770s, there are striking parallels between the ideas of people such as Morgann and Ramsay and Dunmore's own attitude to slavery. Like Morgann, Dunmore was prepared to view black people 'as potential allies rather than internal enemies', and both believed that, by treating them 'as subjects of the crown rather than the property of slaveholders,' the empire might be strengthened.¹⁰⁶

Indeed, Dunmore's own career exemplified the integrative potential of the imperial paternalism that informed Morgann's scheme. His father, William Murray, the third earl, had supported Charles Edward Stuart in 1745, when the young John Murray had briefly been a page to the Young Pretender. The family had almost lost their title as a result. But in the subsequent decades, like much of the Scottish nobility, Dunmore embarked upon a journey of self-incorporation within the British establishment, becoming a loyal servant of the House of Hanover, and reaping the consequent rewards of political patronage.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Lambert & Lester, 'Imperial Spaces, Imperial Subjects', 11; see pp. 45–8 above.

¹⁰⁵ See pp. 48–56 above.

¹⁰⁶ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 219–20. Dunmore may well have met Morgann in his capacity as secretary to Guy Carleton, with whom Dunmore conferred while spending several months in New York in 1782. See Wright, 'Loyalist Asylum', 372; Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 144; pp. 80–81 & n. 5 above.

¹⁰⁷ Colley, *Britons*, 131–2; Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, 81–2; Selby, *Dunmore*, 5–7; Lowe, 'Parliamentary Career', 4–10, 17–27.

Dunmore certainly appreciated the power of more traditional modes of paternalistic authority. A telling illustration is the case of the 78th Seaforth Highland Regiment, recruited from people who spoke only Gaelic, and whom James Boswell described as being ‘as black and wild in their appearance as any American Savages.’ In 1778, on hearing rumours of their being ‘sold’ for service in Asia with the East India Company, the Seaforth Regiment mutinied at Edinburgh, ‘bidding defiance to all the force in Scotland.’ Dunmore, acting on his own initiative and drawing upon his influence as a Scottish nobleman, helped to reassure the soldiers and quell the mutiny. While the rank and file ‘agreeably accepted his assumption of authority and trusted his professions of friendship’, the disgruntled officers of the regiment would complain that ‘he was never desired to interfere... and we believe, acted without any authority whatever’.¹⁰⁸ The paternalistic appeal to disaffected subjects, over the heads of those with formally designated claims of power over them, is clearly reminiscent of Dunmore’s approach to slavery.

Likewise, the complaints of the officers of the 78th echo the outraged response of the Loyalists. Dunmore’s indulgence towards soldiers and slaves was mirrored by a seemingly almost casual willingness to antagonise those higher up the social scale. It was probably inevitable that a large-scale policy of officially sponsored manumission would arouse the ire of slaveholders. But where disorderly and rebellious slaves were placated and conciliated, Dunmore responded to opposition from the white elite with stubborn intransigence, and even, perhaps, with deliberate provocations. He refused to hold new elections to the Assembly, a body he routinely prorogued when it had the temerity to disagree with him. He sanctioned Wylly’s arrest, essentially for insulting one of his friends, and suspended the courts after they failed to convict him. The ‘armed negroes’ who crewed his schooner seized the property and allegedly subverted the slaves of Loyalist planters. John Selby observes that ‘Dunmore actually seemed to want war’ in the final months before hostilities commenced in Virginia; much the same could be said of his relationship with Bahamian Loyalist slaveholders.¹⁰⁹

Wylly contended that Dunmore’s ‘principles of Government are such as might be naturally expected from the Lordly despot of a petty Clan.’¹¹⁰ Scots, of course,

¹⁰⁸ James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, with Samuel Johnson, LL. D.* (London, 1785), 156–8; Prebble, *Mutiny*, 103, 128–33 (*Edinburgh Advertiser* quoted at 133).

¹⁰⁹ Selby, *Dunmore*, 2.

¹¹⁰ Wylly, *Short Account*, 16.

were routinely ‘tinctured with notions of despotism’ in English and American opinion.¹¹¹ But it has been suggested that Scottish imperial officials with Jacobite backgrounds ‘perhaps... were more prone to take a strong line in suppressing colonial disorder, and more unapologetic in devising new and efficient forms of central control.’¹¹² Dunmore certainly had Jacobite antecedents, and, as we have seen, he coupled a jealous defence of executive authority against incursions by the ‘Representatives of the people’ with a scant regard for inconvenient legal niceties.

For Dunmore, however, paternalism towards ‘them poor Blacks’ and aggressively authoritarian handling of ‘the Incendiaries of this Island, who pretend to call themselves Loyalists’ were not simply two distinct facets of his ‘principles of Government.’¹¹³ The two were dialectically linked, and neither can be fully understood without an appreciation of this connection. In this respect, it is illuminating to compare the thinking of another Scottish critic of slaveholding, James Ramsay. As discussed in chapter one, for Ramsay, rolling back colonial autonomy, and checking the colonists’ tendency ‘to exalt the individual at the expence of the community,’ were also necessary pre-requisites to any serious effort to reform or abolish slavery.¹¹⁴ Dunmore may not have believed that the ownership of slaves, in and of itself, represented an abuse of colonists’ freedoms. But he surely shared Ramsay’s view of ‘a natural inequality... among men’, and of an organically hierarchical social order in which ‘each man takes the station for which nature intended him; and his rights are fenced round, and his claims are restrained, by laws prescribed by the Author of nature’, so that ‘the feelings and interests of the weaker, or inferior members, are consulted equally with those of the stronger or superior.’¹¹⁵

Hence, when the slaveholders of Virginia attempted to ‘throw off[f] all Allegiance to the Best of Sovereigns and Connections with the State that has fostered them with the most Parental Care,’ they exceeded the proper role allotted to them

¹¹¹ John Sawbridge, quoted in Colley, *Britons*, 130; see also Richards, ‘Scotland and the Uses of the Atlantic Empire’, 88-90, 95–101; Calder, *Revolutionary Empire*, 427–30, 481–2.

¹¹² Colley, *Britons*, 131–2.

¹¹³ Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 4 March 1788, CO23/27/112; Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 8 April 1788, CO23/27/122.

¹¹⁴ James Ramsay, ‘Motives for the Improvement of the Sugar Colonies’, quoted in Brown, *Moral Capital*, 249.

¹¹⁵ James Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (Dublin, 1784), 1–2.

within the community, and so forfeited the privilege generously afforded them of depriving others of their liberty. As the embodiment of ‘properly constituted authority’, it was entirely within Dunmore’s prerogative to set about ‘reducing this Colony to a proper Sense of their Duty’ by elevating slaves to the status of British soldiers.¹¹⁶

In the Bahamas, the re-enslavement of the very people who had been promised their freedom in the king’s name, including some who had risked life and limb fighting for Britain, could not but be seen by Dunmore as the grossest defiance of the very highest authority. He was not concerned merely ‘to give these poor people redress.’¹¹⁷ By denying African Americans their own liberty, Loyalists, like the rebels, had overstepped their own rights and freedoms, and they too had to be restored ‘to a proper Sense of their Duty.’ State manumission was a remedy that simultaneously punished the guilty and gave redress to those wronged, just as the Virginia Proclamation had rewarded loyalty and punished rebellion.

When Loyalist slaveholders angrily denounced the governor’s actions as an outrage against ‘the Rights of British Subjects, and contrary to the Spirit of our happy Constitution’, and resorted to terrorising defenceless women and children, Dunmore only became more convinced that ‘the Reigns of Government should not be relaxed.’ As far as he was concerned, ‘the sole cause’ of Loyalists’ incessant demands for ‘their right in common with all British subjects’, to what they considered ‘a Free and Equal Representation of the People’ was their need ‘to pass such acts as would secure to them the property’ of re-enslaved African Americans. In turn, for Loyalists, the governor’s repeated refusal to dissolve the Assembly was further evidence of his despotic disregard for the principles of representative government.¹¹⁸

Dunmore soon discerned a more direct parallel between the Loyalists and the Virginian rebels. Chief Justice Matson claimed to have heard the former declare ‘*that a Governor of the Bahamas ought to and shall be nominated by those who have emigrated to that Country under the Description of American Loyalists.*’ Both he and

¹¹⁶ Dunmore to Richard Corbin, Elizabeth River, 27 January 1776, Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection, Dunmore, John Murray, LC (1/2); Proclamation by Dunmore, 7 November 1775, CO5/1353/335.

¹¹⁷ Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 20 December 1787, CO23/27/93.

¹¹⁸ Presentments of the Grand Jury, 24 February 1789, BDA, S.C. 1/2; Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 20 December 1787, CO23/27/93; Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 4 March 1788, CO23/27/112; Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 8 April 1788, CO23/27/122; Petition for Dissolution of the House of Assembly, enclosure in Dunmore to Sydney, 29 February 1788, CO23/27/102.

Dunmore aired suspicions that some Loyalists were planning Bahamian independence from Britain. After Matson was driven out of the colony in 1788, Dunmore openly recommended to London that martial law was necessary, ‘to effectually eradicate the seeds of Rebellion,’ and ‘make a perfect clean sweep... [of] these miscreants.’¹¹⁹

Such claims are probably best understood not as a reflection of genuine fears of Loyalist insurrection, but rather of the depth of Dunmore’s outrage and disgust at the émigrés’ conduct. Loyalist resistance to his measures to liberate African Americans compounded what he already considered a flagrant infraction of their status as subjects of the crown. The result was a cumulative escalation of the mutual antipathy between governor and Loyalists, in which compromise very quickly became impossible. Any concession on Dunmore’s part would not only be an abrogation of his responsibility to the black émigrés; it would also be a dereliction of his own duty to uphold the king’s authority as he perceived it. Quite possibly, the latter had become more important to him than the former by 1793, as the standoff with the Assembly ground towards what had by then become its inevitable conclusion. The next chapter explores how this dynamic of mutual hostility outlived the issue that had catalysed it, serving as a persistent barrier to the fulfilment of Loyalist designs for ‘a Revision of the Laws of these Islands, for governing Slaves and Free People of Colour’.¹²⁰

Remarkable as Dunmore’s actions in the Bahamas were, it is important to acknowledge that his sympathy for enslaved people was always hedged with limits and qualifications. Indeed, it is arguable that Dunmore was persistently willing to champion the cause of non-whites precisely because of his unwillingness to recognise their capacity for independent agency. In Virginia, he does not seem to have envisaged the prospect of African Americans seeking to ‘revenge themselves’ on their own account. Rather, the danger was that slaves would be ‘ready to join the first that would encourage them’ in the event of ‘an attack upon this Colony’. Likewise, in the Bahamas, Dunmore spoke of ‘them poor Blacks’ or ‘these poor unhappy people.’ All-but helpless in the face of re-enslavement, their only hope was ‘the mercy and favour extended towards them’ by the governor. Even when black people openly defied the authority of slaveholders by running away, they were usually mere ‘Delinquents’, who

¹¹⁹ ‘An Account of the present Situation of Affairs in the Bahama Islands’, c. 1788, CO23/28/159 (emphasis in original); Affidavit of William Augustus Bowles, 9 April 1788, CO23/27/158; Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 8 April 1788, CO23/27/122; Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 21 April 1788, CO23/27/156–7.

¹²⁰ Presentments of the Grand Jury, 25 February 1791, BDA, S.C. 1/4.

would quickly see the error of their ways on the dispensation of ‘his Majesty’s Mercy.’ Dunmore had little doubt that, even when faced with a more serious incident like that at Spencer’s Bight, his personal intervention would speedily restore ‘the utmost harmony’, just as it supposedly had among the Seaforth Highlanders.¹²¹

Of course, this was scarcely consistent with the degree to which Dunmore’s overtures to the enslaved in both colonies came in response to prior black initiatives. Indeed, it seems entirely plausible that Dunmore’s attitude owed something to the efforts of ingenuous slaves who correctly gauged that the Scottish aristocrat would respond favourably to their adoption of the well-documented pose of child-like loyalty and dependency.¹²²

But Dunmore’s perception of Africans as idealised paternalistic subjects – loyal, simple, and lacking initiative and agency – had much in common with the discourse of British abolitionism, exemplified by Josiah Wedgwood’s famous motif of the kneeling slave appealing for redress. Many abolitionist leaders, such as Wilberforce and Ramsay, were themselves very much concerned with the need ‘to preserve traditional notions of deference and paternalism’, and could view antislavery as a vehicle not simply for the moral redemption of Britain and Britishness, but also ‘for an explicit vindication of the English social order.’ In 1792, as the initial parliamentary campaign against the slave trade appeared to be on the verge of a decisive breakthrough, Wilberforce made no secret of his view that slaves were ‘not capable’ of ‘True Liberty... the child of Reason and Order’, and that ‘the soil must be prepared for its reception.’¹²³

Indeed, it is striking how closely the trajectory of Bahamian state manumission under Dunmore corresponds to that of early abolitionism. Both emerged in the late 1780s, and appeared to gather rapid momentum before abruptly faltering in the 1790s.

¹²¹ Dunmore to Earl of Hillsborough, 1 May 1772, Davies, ed., *Documents*, 5:94–5; Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 4 March 1788, CO23/27/112; Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 20 November 1787, CO23/27/75; Proclamations by Dunmore, Nassau, 27 October 1787, 7 November 1787, CO23/27/77–8; Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 18 July 1788, CO23/27/165.

¹²² On slaves’ use of the ‘Sambo’ role see Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 1–138; Kenneth W. Blasingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation life in the old South* (revised edn., New York: OUP, 1979), 223–248; Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 35.

¹²³ Davis, *Age of Revolution*, 358, 367, 383–5, 453–61; *The Debate on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade, in the House of Commons, on Monday the Second of April, 1792, Reported in Detail* (London, 1792), 12; the kneeling African motif is discussed within the broader context of the visual history of slavery in Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual representations of slavery in England and America 1780–1865* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 21–3.

Nonetheless, what happened in the Bahamas under Dunmore should not be misconstrued as representing ‘a forgotten moment in early Anglo-American abolitionism.’¹²⁴ It might, perhaps, be regarded as the manifestation of an alternative version of empire, in which blackness could be partially dissociated from slavery via the operation of an authoritarian but benevolent paternalism. If so, however, it was a vision that was becoming obsolete even as it came into being, as the rise of the antislavery movement raised the more ambitious prospect of an Atlantic without slavery. By the time state manumission was abruptly curtailed in 1793, however, the ongoing dynamic of Atlantic revolution had thrown up entirely new possibilities in Saint-Domingue. It had transpired that Africans were able to ‘revenge themselves’ after all.

¹²⁴ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 288.

Chapter Five

‘The Dread of our Country Becoming the Theatre of such Horrors’: the Haitian Revolution and the Bahamas, 1791–1797

Executions

The morning of 14 September 1797 saw the enactment of a gruesome and brutal judicial ritual in Nassau. A week earlier, three black men, Baptiste Perpall, Baptiste Tucker, and Police Edgcombe, had been ‘found guilty of treasonable and seditious Practices,’ in the shape of ‘a most hellish plot’, aimed at ‘the Destruction of... the white Inhabitants of these Islands,’ and sentenced to death. On the appointed day, while a guard of militia dragoons and artillery paraded, supported by the heavily depleted regular garrison, the condemned men ‘ascended the Gallows with the most perfect Indifference.’ All three declined to confess, and seemed quite ready to ‘Meet death without Dismay.’¹ By one account, ‘the principal ring leader’, almost certainly Baptiste Perpall, was heard to remark ‘that he was content to die, as he had murdered many a white man in his time.’² Once dead, their corpses were ‘cut down, and Hung in Chains at the point commonly called Hog Island Point.’ A few days later, President of the Council and acting Governor Robert Hunt was pleased to report that ‘the Execution... took place on the day appointed without any tumult or Commotion whatever’, voicing his opinion that ‘the public tranquillity is happily re-established.’³

Michel Foucault has observed that ‘the public execution is to be understood not only as a judicial, but also as a political ritual.’ It was intended ‘to bring into play, as its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength.’ The importance of such ‘an emphatic affirmation of power and of its intrinsic superiority’ was perhaps all the

¹ *Bahama Gazette*, 15 September 1797; ‘The King versus Baptiste Perpall, Baptiste Tucker, Tom Bethune, Police Edgcombe, & Tom Lockhart: Record of Conviction’, 7 September 1797 (hereafter ‘Record of Conviction’), CO23/36/120; *Albany Centinel*, 28 November 1797.

² *Albany Centinel*, 28 November 1797.

³ ‘Record of Conviction’, CO23/36/122; *Bahama Gazette*, 15 September 1797; Hunt to Portland, Nassau, 20 September 1797, CO23/36/117.

greater to the rulers of the Atlantic world, always conscious that ‘a colony of slaves is a town under threat of attack; one walks on powder kegs.’⁴

Thus far, it would seem that the events of September 1797 in the Bahamas conformed to a pattern common to virtually all sites of Atlantic slavery; one of periodic episodes of exemplary judicial killing in response to a perceived threat of violent, collective resistance on the part of slaves. Such occurrences may not have been routine, but they were certainly common enough to become one of the norms of the governance of slave societies. The inception of a plan to revolt among the enslaved, except in the extremely unlikely event of its success, made the subsequent round of denunciations, trials and executions all but inevitable.⁵

In the Bahamas, however, such events were unusual, to the extent that what happened in 1797 is very nearly unique in Bahamian history. Indeed, executions of any sort seem to have been relatively uncommon in the Bahamas during the period of formal slavery. In 1784, in the midst of the Loyalist migration, the sailor Samuel Kelly observed ‘at the entrance of the harbour on Hog Island... a negro hung on an oblique pole, for murder,’ but did not elaborate upon the nature or timing of the offence or the execution. Reporting the executions of two black men in 1791, one for murder, the other for theft of a ‘sailing boat’, the *Bahama Gazette* noted that ‘these two executions are the only ones that have taken place here during six years.’⁶

The judicial killing of slaves convicted of engaging in acts of rebellion or conspiracy was even more of a rarity. The first documented insurrectionary plot in the Bahamas, involving a plan ‘for the slaves to take over the island [of New Providence], killing all the white men, beginning with the governor’, was uncovered in 1734. Strikingly, even the execution of Quarino, an African runaway whose confession revealed the conspiracy, and who killed a soldier before being captured, is a matter of

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 47–9; ‘Une colonie à esclaves est une ville menacée d’assaut; on y marche sur des barils de poudre’: the words of the French officer and Saint-Domingue planter Laurent François Lenoir, marquis de Rouvray, in a letter of 23 December 1785, quoted in Pierre de Vaissière, *Saint-Domingue. La société et la vie créoles sous l’ancien régime (1629–1789)* (Paris, 1909), 230.

⁵ Some sense of how often this pattern recurred is conveyed by the lists of conspiracies and rebellions occurring in the British West Indies, and in the Caribbean between 1789–1815 that appear respectively in Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 335–9; David Patrick Geggus, ‘Slavery, War, and Revolution in the Greater Caribbean, 1789–1815’, in David Gaspar and Geggus, eds., *Turbulent Time*, 46–9.

⁶ Kelly, *Eighteenth-Century Seaman*, 111; *Bahama Gazette*, 15 April 1791, 29 April 1791.

supposition rather than record.⁷ As we saw above, when African-American émigré maroons on Abaco took up arms against the whites in the 1780s, slaveholders took it upon themselves to suppress and summarily execute the rebels.⁸

In May 1795, Lord Dunmore reported to London the discovery of ‘a Plot... formed by some French Negroes to destroy the Town by fire, liberate the French Prisoners and Massacre the Inhabitants.’ The nature and significance of this somewhat shadowy undertaking, which in many respects constituted a direct prologue to the more serious conspiracy in 1797, are discussed further below. For now, however, what is notable is that the official response, as in 1734, seems to have been remarkably muted. Dunmore advised London that ‘the Ring leaders [were] apprehended and now in custody’, but their fate was apparently not considered a matter of sufficient seriousness to merit discussion in the Council or mention in the governor’s subsequent despatches.⁹ However, Peter Edwards, one of the magistrates who presided over the trial of the 1797 conspirators, mentioned that the man by whom ‘the present alarm has been occasioned’ was ‘a French fellow, a Slave who was accused of the same crime two years ago but turning King’s evidence – he escaped the Sentence of Transportation.’¹⁰ These remarks suggest that, at most, the other men arrested in 1795 were transported, rather than hanged.

What becomes clear from all this is twofold. Firstly, in the eighteenth century, the outright rebellion of enslaved people in the Bahamas, if far from unheard of, was distinctly uncommon. Secondly, the Bahamian state seldom sanctioned the capital punishment of slaves for such behaviour. Against this backdrop, the events of 1797 are thrown into sharp relief. A partial explanation of the relative ferocity of the official response can be found in the nature of the conspiracy, as the authorities perceived it. For, at least according to the trial testimony against them, the aim of Perpall et al. was quite explicitly ‘to Fight and take the Country from the White People’, in order ‘to put themselves in the same situation the black people were in at the Cape [Français, in

⁷ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:139.

⁸ See pp. 152–3 above.

⁹ Dunmore to Portland, Nassau, 10 May 1795, CO23/34/45; Dunmore announced the discovery of the conspiracy to the Council on 17 April, who merely recommended the compilation of a list of the names, sex and ages of all ‘French Negroes’ on New Providence; see CO23/35/36.

¹⁰ Edwards to Chalmers, Nassau, 1 September 1797, Chalmers Papers, JCBL, reel 2. Edwards was a Georgia Loyalist and slaveholder who moved to East Florida in 1776, where he was Clerk of the Assembly, a post he also held in the Bahamas from 1789. See Sabine, *Biographical Sketches*, 250–1; Parrish, ‘Records’, 257–8; CO23/30/2; *Bahama Gazette*, 5 April 1788 (at CO23/31/246).

Saint-Domingue].'¹¹ This amounted to a plan for an insurrectionary, if not revolutionary challenge, not only to slavery, but even to the colonial regime itself, that is without parallel in Bahamian history.

As will be explored more fully below, the evidence that has survived is not without its problems and ambiguities. As with all slave conspiracies, in the final analysis only the fact of an actual rising would provide incontrovertible verification that black Bahamians in 1797 seriously considered open rebellion to be a desirable and feasible undertaking. At a time when an ongoing discourse about rebellion, revolution, and freedom was circulating around the full extent of the black Atlantic diaspora, it can plausibly be argued that Perpall, Tucker and Edgcombe were guilty of no more than a lack of discretion. It may well be the case that the claims about the scale of the conspiracy made at their trial were exaggerated. Ultimately, of course, the 'true' motives and intentions of the conspirators, the meanings that shaped and informed their ideas, and the vision, if any, of social transformation that inspired them are largely beyond historical reconstruction. While their broken bodies might be made to serve as a continuing emblem of state power, their minds offered nothing that could be of use to the slaveholders, not even the confessions that could validate the act of their destruction. Nonetheless, the fact remains that in 1797, Bahamian authorities and slaveholders firmly believed in the existence of such a challenge. Furthermore, they were quite sure that it was a potential threat to their regime, a threat serious enough to provoke the ceremony of terror and power that was staged on 14 September. How could this happen, and why did it happen in 1797?

Referring to the first slave trade abolition bill, debated by parliament in 1788, in July the same year, Lord Dunmore could reassure London that 'there has been no kind of disturbance whatever, amongst the Negroes on these Islands in consequence of the reports of an Abolition of the Slave Trade, nor do they seem in the least anxious about it.' Four years later, Dunmore was still confidently advising Secretary of State Henry Dundas that 'there is not the least appearance of any disorderly behaviour among the Slaves in this Government.'¹² Exaggerated as these claims of tranquillity

¹¹ Jack's Testimony, Yengee's Testimony, 'Record of Conviction', CO23/36/120-21; Examination of Francis Montell, Minutes of Council 22 August 1797, CO23/36/109.

¹² Dunmore to Sydney, Nassau, 30 July 1788, CO23/28/29; Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 1 April 1792, CO23/31/109.

were, in 1792, no-one in the Bahamas apparently considered a slave insurrection an imminent or likely prospect.

Over the next five years, the Bahamian government and ruling class would perceive a rising threat to their regime from slave resistance, and show increasing willingness to deploy the coercive power of the state to curb this challenge. Growing white fears of slave rebellion from 1792 onwards owed a great deal to the contemporaneous development of the Haitian and French Revolutions.¹³ There has been little systematic and sustained analysis of the Bahamian repercussions of the revolutionary crisis of the 1790s, although its effects were substantial and direct.¹⁴

In this respect, the significance of the simple fact of war between Britain and Revolutionary France from 1793 should not be ignored. If the causes of that conflict were principally European, the imperial nature of both powers made it almost inevitable that the fighting would spread beyond Europe, as had happened virtually without exception during the previous century of occasional and short-lived peace between the two.

It was hardly a new experience for Bahamians, or for any other residents of British America, to find themselves arbitrarily involved in war with neighbouring colonies. But the conflict that unfolded in the Caribbean during the 1790s was not simply a traditional imperial contest for the redistribution of colonies. The ill-fated British invasion of Saint-Domingue has been variously interpreted as both a defensive and aggressive move. It can also be seen as either a largely improvised response to peculiar and unprecedented circumstances, or as part of a larger imperial grand strategy, the culmination of long-harboured designs against the ‘Pearl of the Antilles’.¹⁵ Regardless, British troops entered Saint-Domingue with the mission of occupying it and crushing French forces loyal to the Revolution, but also to bring

¹³ On the inter-related trajectories of the Haitian and French Revolutions, and their impact on the wider Atlantic world see for instance Gaspar and Geggus, eds., *Turbulent Time*, especially Geggus, ‘Slavery, War, and Revolution’, 1–50, and Carolyn E. Fick, ‘The French Revolution in Saint Domingue: A Triumph or a Failure?’, 51–75; Geggus, ed., *Impact of the Haitian Revolution*; Blackburn, *Overthrow*, 161–264; James, *Black Jacobins*; Scott, ‘The Common Wind’.

¹⁴ The most extensive treatment is probably Sean McWeeney, ‘Not Far From the Madding Crowd: Bahamian reaction to the revolutionary upheaval in Haiti and the intensification of racial control’, *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society*, 24 (October 2002), 17–27.

¹⁵ James tends towards the latter view in both cases in *The Black Jacobins*: see especially 41–4, 107–119. For contrasting assessments see Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 79–99; Michael Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower. The British expeditions to the West Indies and the war against Revolutionary France* (Oxford: OUP, 1987), 1–22.

order to the colony and restore its vast pre-Revolutionary economic output. More and more, therefore, and explicitly so after the Jacobin government's decree of 16 Pluviôse abolishing slavery, Britain found itself fighting to defend enslavement in the face of French revolutionary emancipationism. A war of this kind rendered the British Atlantic, including the Bahamas, all the more vulnerable to shockwaves from the seismic eruption of revolution in Saint-Domingue.

Revolutionary war, as Bahamians had good reason to be aware, facilitated the intensified circulation of both people and experience around the Atlantic. The kind of war waged in the West Indies inevitably generated extensive new patterns of human contact across the arbitrary lines of nationality and sovereignty. Specifically, the Haitian Revolution and the accompanying Anglo-French conflict drew black people from the French islands into British colonies like the Bahamas, whether as the property of refugee French slaveholders, as contraband of war, seized aboard foreign prizes, or as prisoners of war, as free men captured while fighting in the name of liberty, equality and brotherhood.

War might have still further material consequences for the British slave colonies. For islands like the Bahamas, dependent upon imports of food and other basic necessities, enemy control of the seas was an alarming prospect. Food shortages might have disastrous effects, economically and socially, and the threat of invasion could never be entirely discounted. Historically, the Bahamas' primary defence against direct attack had been their insignificance in the larger scheme of imperial rivalry, but this also meant that more valuable colonies like Jamaica took precedence in the allocation of military and naval resources.

The bulk of this chapter explores how all these factors together made possible the Bahamian slave conspiracy of 1797. In order to show their complex interplay and cumulative effect, the arrangement of what follows is principally chronological. After surveying the state of the Bahamas at the start of the 1790s and initial Bahamian perceptions of the outbreak of revolution in France and Saint-Domingue in Section I, the following two sections examine how war and revolution impacted on the islands up to 1797, before the events of that year and their consequences are considered in more detail in Section IV.

I: 'The Crowd of Unlooked For Events': Bahamian Perceptions of the French and Haitian Revolutions to 1793

The early 1790s were a period of relative stability in the Bahamas. The various social and political tensions that had produced dramatic scenes of conflict during the 1780s were still simmering, but a delicate equilibrium briefly emerged.

Such evidence as exists suggests a slowing of the tempo of overt resistance to slavery after 1789. There was no reprise of the violent, quasi-insurrectionary confrontations seen on Abaco in 1787–8. The number of runaway advertisements, aside from a brief flurry in the first half of 1790 that slaveholders largely blamed upon 'the protection and encouragement afforded in the Spanish Colonies to our Runaway Slaves',¹⁶ declined markedly from the levels of the 1780s. Likewise, although runaways lived as maroons in the interior of New Providence well into the nineteenth century, there is apparently no evidence of their presence or activity between 1790 and 1797.¹⁷

Slaveholders certainly did not desist from condemning the behaviour of slaves and free non-whites, or from demanding more stringent regulation and policing of such delinquency. The Grand Jury's presentments maintained their monotonous complaints of the 'disorderly behaviour' of black people, the need for reform of the laws for their 'government', and the inadequate enforcement of the existing legislation.¹⁸ However, for all their grumbling, slaveholders apparently did not resort to vigilantism and extra-legal violence in the early 1790s as they had on Abaco and New Providence in the 1780s; John M. Tattnell never made good his threat to 'burn every House belonging to the Free Negroes.'¹⁹

¹⁶ 'Extract of a letter from Crooked Island', 14 April 1790, *Daily Advertiser*, New York, 14 May 1790; see also *Bahama Gazette*, 16 April 1790; Dunmore to Grenville, Nassau, 5 April 1790, CO23/30/199. On the longstanding Spanish practice of welcoming runaway slaves from British colonies (revoked in new royal instructions to governors of May 1790) see Scott, 'The Common Wind', 93–103.

¹⁷ Journals of the General Assembly, 11–14 June 1790, CO23/30/267–8; Proclamation by Lord Dunmore, Nassau, 17 June 1790, *Bahama Gazette*, 18 June 1790; on nineteenth-century marronage see pp. 245–6 below.

¹⁸ See for instance Presentments of the Grand Jury, 23 February 1790, BDA, S.C. 1/2; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 25 February 1791, BDA, S.C. 1/4; Presentments of the Grand Jury, *Bahama Gazette*, 433, 10 June 1791; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 31 August 1790, BDA, S.C. 1/4.

¹⁹ Dunmore to Nepean, Nassau, 20 December 1787, CO23/27/92.

A definitive explanation of this period of relative tranquillity is probably beyond the limits of the available sources. But it is at least plausible to hypothesise that the process of state manumission, which reached its highest levels in these years, played a significant part. As well as going some way towards addressing the peculiar grievances of African-American émigrés in the Bahamas regarding re-enslavement, state manumission offered potential runaways an alternative route to freedom. The woman who called herself ‘*Free Nancy*’, for instance, ran away in 1789, after being ‘lately adjudged a Slave by the Court appointed to ascertain the Freedom of Negroes’.²⁰

What is not in doubt, as we saw in the previous chapter, is that during the 1790s the ‘Negro Court’ remained a major focal point for political conflict between Loyalist slaveholders and imperial authorities, in the form of Lord Dunmore. But the critics of state manumission now seem to have been more willing to air their concerns and seek redress through the established institutional channels of the Grand Jury and the House of Assembly. In the 1780s, Loyalists had despatched fervent memorials to the king and the London government, written angry letters to the *Gazette*, and even resorted to public demonstrations and open violence. What had changed? To some extent, the sense of impending social crisis that animated this vigorous activism seems to have dissipated.

In turn, the comparative equanimity of Bahamian slaveholders in these years may well have owed something to the rapid recovery and progress of the cotton economy after the crisis of 1788–9. It was clear by 1790 that cotton would not succeed on Abaco or New Providence, but this was more than offset by the rapid development of warmer islands to the south, such as the Caicoses and Crooked Island.²¹ In that year, almost 500 tons of clean cotton were exported, considerably more than had been expected from the 1788–9 crop destroyed by the chenille, and more than double the level of annual production actually achieved in the 1780s. Output continued to rise over the following years, apparently reaching around 750 tons sometime before 1796.²² Such figures obscure the extent to which cotton continued to prove a frustratingly inconsistent crop for individual planters. In 1790, the *Gazette* related the

²⁰ *Bahama Gazette*, 7 February 1789; see also pp. 118–20 above.

²¹ Wylly, *Short Account*, 4, 7; ‘Observations by Lord Dunmore on such of the Bahama Islands as he visited’, 1 September 1790, CO23/30/238.

²² *Bahama Gazette*, 10 May 1791; [John Wells] to George Chalmers, Nassau, 1 January 1796, CO23/34/327.

‘curious and important fact, that some fields which were wholly neglected, and other that were never topped, have been productive; while several, on which much labour and attention have been bestowed, yielded scarcely anything.’ A year later, it was observed that ‘many Planters who made good Crops last Year, have failed this.’²³ But in general, confidence in cotton’s long-term success remained high; in 1792, John Wells could write of ‘a Spirit of Improvement – the sure indication of rising prosperity’, noting that ‘the Planters are in high Spirits from the Prospect of an abundant Crop.’²⁴

With the benefit of hindsight, a far more serious structural weakness of the Bahamian cotton economy was the extent of its continuing reliance on imported food to sustain the enslaved workforce. The potential benefits of self-sufficiency had been repeatedly extolled, but most planters seem to have either lacked the inclination or capacity to revise the improvised Out Island labour settlement of the 1780s, or simply preferred to expand their cotton acreage instead.²⁵ The acute vulnerability to unpredictable external conditions that this practice entailed would be starkly exposed by the storm of war and revolution that was to engulf the British Atlantic from 1793.

However, at least initially, there is nothing to indicate that the white Bahamian elite identified any potential threat to themselves in the demise of the *ancien regime*. Notwithstanding the observation in a letter from London of October 1789 that ‘the situation of France is truly deplorable’, the *Bahama Gazette*’s first issue of 1790 merely noted that ‘the spreading of the generous Flame of Freedom’ to France would be ‘highly interesting to every Class of Reader’, and that this ‘Prospect of Events’ was surely ‘the most important that has occurred in modern Times.’ An October 1789 ‘Review of European Politics’ reprinted by the *Gazette* in February 1790 spoke of how ‘Liberty... returns and raises her standard in the very centre of the civilised world.’²⁶ Indeed, the National Assembly’s legislation of March 1790, simultaneously exempting France’s colonies from the national constitution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man, whilst also specifically precluding any colonial interference with the

²³ *Bahama Gazette*, 14 May 1790, 31 May 1791.

²⁴ *Bahama Gazette*, 18 December 1792, 1 December 1792.

²⁵ See for instance the calls for greater self-sufficiency in food production in *Bahama Gazette*, 24 October 1789, 15 January 1790, 21 March 1793.

²⁶ *Bahama Gazette*, 26 December 1789, 1 January 1790, 26 February 1790.

regulation of transatlantic commerce, including the slave trade, was met with predictable approval in the Bahamas. The *Bahama Gazette* observed that

This question may now be considered as finally decided by the commercial nations. If the Legislators of France, in all their boldness of innovation, rage for freedom, and fervour of philanthropy shrink from the discussion as pregnant with peril, the British Senate cannot be insensible to the absurdity and impolicy of turning such a stream of opulence to their rivals – The Planter, the Merchant, and the Manufacturer may therefore now securely dismiss all apprehensions of their interests being sacrificed to the wild dreams of visionary reformers.²⁷

Tentative enthusiasm for France's 'rage for freedom' rapidly paled as the Revolution's radicalising trajectory became apparent. By the start of 1791, the *Gazette* noted with unconcealed distaste that 'the National Assembly have adopted with enthusiastic ardour, the wildest speculations of Democratic Theorists, the irreligious prejudices of Modern Philosophers, and the selfish schemes of needy, unprincipled Adventurers.' A few months later, a review of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* declared that work to be 'among the most useful and the most splendid of those discourses on liberty and government... of the last hundred and fifty years.' A correspondent to the *Bahama Gazette* ventured to suggest that at times, some political reform might be necessary, and even desirable, but was at pains to stress both his general admiration for Burke, and his '[perfect] accord with his opinions respecting many things lately done in France.'²⁸

The *Gazette* also carried extensive coverage of the violent turn taken by race relations in several of the French islands during the early 1790s. As early as November 1789, there were reports of 'attempts to alienate the minds of the People of Colour' on Saint-Domingue. These were shortly followed by accounts of the mulatto

²⁷ *Bahama Gazette*, 1 June 1790. On the significance of these measures see Dubois, *Avengers*, 84–5; Blackburn, *Overthrow*, 178–9.

²⁸ *Bahama Gazette*, 1 June 1790, 4 January 1791, 11 March 1791, 21 May 1790.

rebellion led by Vincent Ogé, and its bloody repression, and the ‘confusion and uproar’ prevailing in the French West Indies.²⁹

However, for all that Bahamian slaveholders viewed the radicalisation of the French Revolution with concern, there is nothing to suggest that they initially discerned any dangerous implications for the British colonial slave regimes. Considering that the National Assembly had explicitly disavowed any intention of interfering with slavery, it is scarcely surprising that it simply did not at first occur to Bahamians that the enslaved might be able to draw inspiration or support from the Revolution. If any European development presented a potential danger, it was British abolitionism. Indeed, the *Gazette* printed claims that the parliamentary debates over the slave trade had ‘been translated into... French... and distributed in the islands of Martinique and Dominica’, giving rise to unrest in the former and insurrection in the latter.³⁰

Such complacency must have been badly shaken by the massive slave revolt that began in Saint-Domingue’s North province in August 1791.³¹ The vague accounts of ‘a very bloody Scene... recently acted in St. Domingo’ that had reached the Bahamas by early September were initially associated with the ongoing political turmoil on the island between multiple factions of whites and free people of colour, and treated with a degree of scepticism. The details that gradually emerged over the following weeks in reports from Cuba, Jamaica and Saint-Domingue itself progressively amplified the magnitude of what had happened. On 11 October, the *Bahama Gazette* spoke for the first time of ‘a very alarming insurrection of the mulattoes and negroes’ that had destroyed as many as sixty-four plantations, but could reassure its readers that ‘their ravages were, however, put a stop to in a few days’. A

²⁹ *Bahama Gazette*, 28 November 1789, 8 February 1791, 15 February 1791, 21 December 1790; on Ogé’s rebellion see Dubois, *Avengers*, 80–88; Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 82–4. Craton & Saunders suggest in *Islanders*, 1:206–7 that reports of Ogé’s rebellion inspired the proposal put forward in 1789 to require all Bahamian free non-whites to register themselves and report for work on the public roads on pain of re-enslavement; see Journals of the General Assembly, 27 February 1789, CO23/30/17. Unfortunately, Ogé did not return to Saint-Domingue to start his uprising until October 1790.

³⁰ *Bahama Gazette*, 5 July 1791. On developments in Martinique and Dominica see respectively Dubois, *Colony of Citizens*, 85–9; Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 224–6.

³¹ On the insurrection of 1791 see Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 76–117; Dubois, *Avengers*, 91–114; Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 55–98; Yves Benot, ‘The Insurgents of 1791, their Leaders, and the Concept of Independence’, in Geggus & Fiering, eds., *World of the Haitian Revolution*, 99–110.

week later, ‘dreadful intelligence’ arrived via Kingston that the slaves of Saint-Domingue were still ‘carrying destruction and bloodshed throughout the country.’³²

In the same issue, the Gazette printed a translation of the letter of Paul Cadusch, president of the Saint-Domingue Assembly, to the Jamaican legislature. Begging for aid and support, Cadusch also observed that ‘the same spirit of delusive Philanthropy, which, equally repugnant to your system of regulation as to ours, may occasion the same calamities among you as among us, if the evil is suffered to proceed to the utmost excess’.³³ Shocking as this news must have been for Bahamian slaveholders, Dunmore assured London in April 1792 that there were no signs of slave unrest, ‘and that we have very little communication with any of the French West India Islands.’³⁴

Indeed, Dunmore’s dispatches do not even mention Saint-Domingue, the French colonies, or the possibility of unrest in the Bahamas again before 1793. There is certainly no Bahamian parallel to the extensive evidence that Jamaica was on the brink of a major uprising in the winter of 1791–2.³⁵ It is notable that the Bahamian Assembly’s proposed tariff of duties on slave imports for 1792, clearly designed to restrict the entry of potentially subversive blacks and creoles generally, includes no specific provisions concerning French or ‘foreign’ slaves.³⁶ But if it was initially possible for Bahamians to largely disregard the ramifications of what was happening in Saint-Domingue, the French Republic’s declaration of war on Great Britain on 1 February 1793 would quickly make such a stance untenable.

³² *Bahama Gazette*, 9 September 1791 (first quotation), 11 October 1791; ‘Jamaica Intelligence’, Kingston, 3 September 1791, in *Bahama Gazette*, 18 October 1791. See also *Bahama Gazette*, 27 September 1791, 4 October 1791.

³³ *Bahama Gazette*, 18 October 1791.

³⁴ Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 1 April 1792, CO23/31/109.

³⁵ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 90–95.

³⁶ Journals of the General Assembly, 17 July 1792, CO23/32/45–6.

II: ‘Amid the Din of War and the tumult of innovation’: 1793–4

On 5 February 1793, colonial agent George Chalmers wrote to the Bahamian Assembly’s Committee of Correspondence from London, advising them that ‘a War with France seems to have begun, though hostilities have not actually commenced.’ This state of phoney war was to persist for some time in the Caribbean, at least on the part of the British, partly because ‘primacy was always afforded to the war in Europe’ by the government. Nonetheless, the idea of aggressive action against France’s Atlantic colonies was clearly in circulation in London as early as the start of February, when Chalmers hinted that ‘there is reason to think that the French Islands in your vicinity will ‘ere long change their Masters.’³⁷

However, a definite political decision for intervention in Saint-Domingue was not made until April, and the necessary military orders were issued only two months later. The first substantial reinforcements of British regulars would not depart for the West Indies until November, and even this expedition, of 6,000 men, was pitifully small by the scale of the European war. By the summer of 1793, the British navy could boast only two frigates on the Jamaica station, whose responsibilities nominally included the defence of Bahamian waters. As David Geggus has remarked, for most of the first year of war, ‘the contemporary picture of Britain as a maritime colossus whose fleets and armies would storm through the Caribbean was ironically unrealistic.’³⁸

However, the very fact of war with France had inescapable consequences for Britain’s West Indian colonies, including the Bahamas. Indeed, even before the declaration of war, Chalmers had suggested to the Commissioners in January that ‘it may be of great use to watch over all Foreigners, who may come into the Bahamas on whatever pretence; & to attend to such Books as may be circulated among Servants and Slaves.’ He reiterated in his letter of 5 February the importance of ‘precautions that ought to be taken with regard Foreigners, and... all seditious persons, who may be disposed to incite your Slaves to disobedience.’³⁹

³⁷ Chalmers to Committee of Correspondence, 5 February 1793, Letters of George Chalmers, Colonial Agent 1792–1803, microfilm in BDA, ff. 31–2; Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 86. On Chalmers’ background see p. 35, n. 96 above.

³⁸ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 82–95; see also Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower*, 41.

³⁹ Chalmers to Committee of Correspondence, 14 January 1793, 5 February 1793, Letters of George Chalmers, Colonial Agent 1792–1803, microfilm in BDA, ff. 25, 32.

The French declaration of war was reported in the *Bahama Gazette* on 16 April, but official confirmation from London took far longer to arrive. As late as June, Dunmore was complaining to Secretary of State Henry Dundas that he had received no official communication from London since October 1792.⁴⁰ Well before then, however, the governor had been compelled to respond to the situation on his own initiative. On 11 April, the Council considered ‘the present high prices of provisions’, expressing concern that the existing stocks of food were ‘totally inadequate even for a very short space to the support of the number of consumers’, and that ‘the quantity [of food] expected in the usual mode from the United States, and from Europe, could by no means afford an adequate supply.’⁴¹

Although the reasons for this shortage are not explicitly stated in the Council Minutes, Dunmore would receive word shortly afterwards from George Miller, the British consul at Charleston, that a French frigate, the *Embuscade*, had arrived at the city on 8 April. The *Embuscade* had ‘taken several prizes’, and had ‘block[ed] up this harbour completely.’ More French privateers were ‘fitting out here’, with two light vessels of six guns each putting to sea sometime before 4 May. By June, Dunmore reported that all Bahamian merchant ships carrying provisions ‘have been Captured by French Privateers fitted out at Charleston,’ with only ‘American vessels bringing in food.’⁴² The food crops planted on the Out Islands were ‘totally destroyed’ by ‘a Severe gale of Wind’ during October. In December, the governor would claim that ‘not one British Vessel has attempted to Sail from these Islands to America, since those that were captured by the French.’⁴³

Thus, by May at the latest, French privateering was seriously affecting the supply of food to the Bahamas. Dunmore’s solution was to prohibit the export of food, and to admit imports of provisions in foreign shipping. Of course, this action contravened the Navigation Acts, earning the governor a stern warning from Dundas that it was ‘a Step not only illegal but which in time of war may open a

⁴⁰ ‘European Intelligence’, *Bahama Gazette*, 16 April 1793; Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 25 June 1793, CO23/32/116.

⁴¹ Council Minutes, 11 April 1793, CO23/32/112–3, CO23/33/34.

⁴² Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 25 May 1793, CO23/32/105; Miller to Dunmore, Charleston, 12 April 1793, CO23/32/107; Miller to Dunmore, Charleston, 4 May 1793, CO23/32/108; Dunmore to Dundas, 25 June 1793, CO23/32/116.

⁴³ Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 14 December 1793, CO23/33/14.

Communication highly dangerous to the Islands under your Government.’⁴⁴

According to the minutes of the Council for 11 April, ‘the Governor felt every repugnance to a step so very strong, and the Council were extremely averse to advise it without the most pointed and incontrovertible necessity.’ However, there was a general consensus that ‘in the course of the debate on the subject... this necessity’ had been ‘most certainly demonstrated.’

The nature of this ‘most pointed and incontrovertible necessity’ is what principally concerns us here. The Council minutes baldly state that ‘if a scarcity [of provisions] should take place, a revolt of the Slaves would probably ensue.’⁴⁵ How did the men who were effectively the government of the Bahamas arrive at such a conclusion? It is difficult to understand why they might have assumed that food shortages, in and of themselves, would automatically, or even ‘probably’ lead to insurrection. There was little precedent for such a presumption in Bahamian history, or in the experience of British slavery more generally. Most recently, disruption to the supply of imported food from North America during the American Revolutionary War had caused famine and starvation in the West Indies, but not a wave of slave rebellions. The Jamaican Hanover Parish conspiracy scare of 1775 had been the most significant such incident in the British Caribbean, but even this incident occurred before shortages became acute.⁴⁶

It is possible that Dunmore and the Council deliberately exaggerated the potential consequences of a Bahamian food shortage in 1793 for reasons of their own. At least one Councillor, John Miller, was a merchant who might have stood to gain from a decision to open Nassau to foreign shipping.⁴⁷ But no contemporary ever suggested that either Dunmore or his cronies on the Council benefited from the admission of foreign shipping. Given just how much corruption Dunmore *was* accused

⁴⁴ Proclamations by Dunmore, Nassau, 8 April, 11 April 1793, CO23/32109–110; Dundas to Dunmore, London, 10 August 1793, CO23/32/119.

⁴⁵ Council Minutes, 11 April 1793, CO23/32/112–3.

⁴⁶ Richard B. Sheridan, ‘The Crisis of Slave Subsistence in the British West Indies during and after the American Revolution’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 33:4 (October 1976), 615–41; Sheridan, ‘Insurrection Scare of 1776’, 290–308.

⁴⁷ Wylly, *Short Account*, 15, 18.

of, it seems hard to sustain an unverified assumption of venal motivations in this case.⁴⁸

It is perhaps more plausible to suggest that the Council invoked the spectre of servile revolt to justify their prioritising of Bahamian interests at the expense of imperial ones, at least as London perceived them. The situation in Saint-Domingue and Jamaica certainly gave metropolitan officials and politicians reason to be more than usually concerned by the temper of the enslaved labour force in the British West Indies. But Dunmore, in his reply to Dundas' rebuke, claimed that 'an insurrection of the Negroes... was apprehended before ever I consented to the opening of the Ports for foreign Vessels.'⁴⁹ The nature of this 'apprehension' is unclear. The minutes for 11 April mention that 'the Board resumed consideration of... the papers laid before them yesterday by His Excellency's order', but there are apparently no records of proceedings for the previous day, or any indication of the content of these 'papers.' Nor does there seem to be any firm evidence for fears of imminent insurrection before April 1793.⁵⁰

In any case, the Bahamian government's professed concern at the possibility of slave rebellion in 1793 was novel, and their 'apprehension' was taken seriously in London. In December, Dunmore warned Dundas once again that 'if our Ports are shut... the greatest distress must insue, and the total desolation of these Islands take place', since 'an insurrection... in the present distressed State of the Country is still more to be dreaded'.⁵¹ The Secretary of State did not press the point further.

If Dunmore's prophecies of impending ruin were somewhat hyperbolic, the anxious tone of the Council's deliberations reflected the inherent vulnerability of island plantation colonies during wartime. Concentration on the production of export staples meant reliance upon markets and sources of essential supplies that might be hundreds or thousands of miles away. If command of the sea were lost, such colonies faced financial and material strangulation. Moreover, the archipelagic plantation economy that had been constructed in the Bahamas amounted to a microcosmic local

⁴⁸ For allegations of corruption against Dunmore see for instance Adam Chrystie to Dundas, Nassau, 27 November 1793, 22 June 1793, CO23/33/2-3, 104-7; Chalmers to Portland, London, 13 February 1796, CO23/34/324-5; Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 13, 19 November 1796, 2, 14 January 1797, 26, 20, 28 February 1797, CO23/35/24-5, 52-4, 92-4, 102-3, 110-11, 157-64, 175-8.

⁴⁹ Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 14 December 1793, CO23/33/14.

⁵⁰ Minutes of Council, 11 April 1793, CO23/33/34.

⁵¹ Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 14 December 1793, CO23/33/15.

reproduction of these characteristics. As the Committee of Correspondence explained to George Chalmers in 1796,

Nassau is the depot to which almost the whole Produce of the Colony is sent for Exportation to the Mother Country and from which the Planters upon the Out Islands receive almost every Article of Extraneous supply.

This employs a number of Dragging vessels, who never venture out to Sea, but carry on a Sort of Island Trade, which is... of absolute necessity to ourselves...⁵²

Dependence upon this short-range, inter-island traffic rendered the Out Islands especially vulnerable to privateering. The intricate web of narrow channels between the Exumas, Long Island and Crooked Island in particular proved to be rich hunting grounds for French raiders.

As early as May 1793, planters on those islands petitioned Nassau for assistance, reporting that ‘several Vessels of the Enemy for several days past have infested the Coasts of Exuma,’ and that the French had ‘landed at Mr [William] Telfair’s Western Plantation and carried off what Negroes they could catch.’ The Out Islands lacked ‘any regular defence’, and ‘few of the Inhabitants... possessed... any kind of Arms for self defence.’ All the Council could do was order the distribution of 200 muskets between the five largest islands, leaving just 400 guns in the Nassau magazine. As the paltry issue of 36 rounds of ammunition per weapon made clear, the colonial government simply did not have the military resources to effectively defend the 100,000 square miles of land and sea encompassed by the archipelago.⁵³

Nassau’s apparent impotence in the face of French attacks led many Out Islanders to appeal directly to London for protection. A group of Exuma planters lobbied the ‘Merchants of London trading to the Bahama Islands’, warning that ‘the defenceless state of this & the neighbouring Islands will subject them to insults and depredations from the enemy... unless some aid is given them by Government.’⁵⁴

⁵² Committee of Correspondence to Chalmers, 7 July 1796, Committee of Correspondence Letters to George Chalmers, Colonial Agent 1796–1817, microfilm in BDA, ff. 2–3.

⁵³ Memorial of Out Islanders, Nassau, 13 May 1793, CO23/33/35; Minutes of Council, 14 May 1793 CO23/33/35; Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 17 July 1793, CO23/32/124.

⁵⁴ Memorial of Exuma Planters to London Merchants, 3 May 1793, CO23/32/240.

Denys Rolle, the absentee planter whose Exuma estates were among the largest slaveholdings in the colony, wrote directly to Dundas in August to urge that ships be provided for the defence of the Out Islands. He considered the situation so serious as to warrant 'the Necessity of my Negroes on Exuma being armed,' claiming that his slaves had 'expressed Great Gratitude to their Master and would protect his Property as well as their own... Riches gain'd by Extra Labour and Stock.'⁵⁵ However, these appeals to London produced little effect. For all that the Bahamian elite continued to boast of 'the Importance of the Bahama Islands to the Commerce and Manufactures of Great Britain,'⁵⁶ there were far more pressing claims upon British naval resources.

If the exposure of Out Island plantations to raiding was a relatively novel development, the strategic value of the Bahamas as a base for aggressive naval operations had been well-established as long ago as the seventeenth-century heyday of Atlantic piracy. Despite of the lack of formal instructions from London, Dunmore reported on 25 May that, following the example of Jamaica and other British colonies, he had 'been induced to grant Letters of Marque, as well for Annoying the Trade of the Enemy as for the protection of the Islands under my Government, having no Ships of War or Armed Vessels of any kind here.' Bahamian wreckers, a 'bold adventurous Set of Men, most of them Blacks', had always been quick to take up privateering during wartime, and many Loyalist émigrés also engaged in this highly lucrative pursuit. By November, as many as 157 prize ships had been sent into Nassau.⁵⁷

However Bahamian privateering was overwhelmingly geared towards private gain, and in some respects it may even have exacerbated the problems caused by the French raiders. In July, John Wells wrote that the Bahamian privateers, 'now twenty-five in number, and carrying a thousand men, have been very successful.' Almost fifty ships had been captured, and Wells estimated that their value 'exceeds one million of Dollars.' However, he acknowledged that most of the prizes had been American vessels, and suggested that 'in the event of an American War, our own Privateers will

⁵⁵ Rolle to Dundas, n.d. [received 28 August 1793], CO23/32/261–3.

⁵⁶ Committee of Correspondence to Chalmers, 7 July 1796, Committee of Correspondence Letters to George Chalmers, Colonial Agent 1796–1817, microfilm in BDA, f. 2.

⁵⁷ Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 25 May 1793, CO23/32/105; Attorney General Moses Franks to Dundas, Nassau, 22 September 1794, CO23/33/126; 'List of Vessels Sent as Prizes into the Port of Nassau from the 1st of April 1793', enclosure in Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 17 February 1794, CO23/33/67–9.

be doubled in number.’⁵⁸ Many Loyalists doubtless welcomed the opportunity to settle old scores, and the succour that French privateers reportedly received in Charleston and Philadelphia provided a further animus.⁵⁹ But at a time when food and other imports were supposedly in such desperately short supply, seizures of American shipping can scarcely have encouraged imports from the United States. And of course, every Bahamian ship on the hunt for prizes was one that was not carrying much-needed provisions.

In the context of what was happening in Saint-Domingue, privateering created further difficulties for Dunmore and Bahamian slaveholders. The status of the crews and passengers of captured French ships who began to accumulate in Nassau proved intensely problematic. Dunmore reported to Dundas in June that he had received ‘a number of French Prisoners, several of whom have been in confinement at St. Domingo for their Loyalty and Attachment to their Sovereign’, and admitted frankly that ‘I am really at a loss what to do with them.’⁶⁰

In July 1793, word reached Nassau of ‘the most melancholy Event that has yet marked the Outrages of the French Revolution in the West Indies’, the ‘total destruction of that once Beautifull and populous City Cape Francois’ in fighting between the forces of Governor François-Thomas Galbaud and the Republican Commissioners Léger Felicité Sonthonax and Etienne Polverel.⁶¹ On 22 and 23 June, Polverel and Sonthonax had recaptured Le Cap with the aid of several thousand black insurgents, recruited on a promise of freedom and ‘all the rights belonging to French citizens.’⁶²

Dunmore issued a proclamation ‘restraining the Admission of French Mulattoes and Free Negroes into these Islands’ on 16 July, and he assured London that all French free non-whites ‘such as have been brought here, in Vessels captured by our Privateers... have been confined aboard the Prison Vessels in the Harbour.’⁶³ Slaves, however, were a different matter. As property, they could apparently be freely

⁵⁸ Wells to Chalmers, Nassau, 19 July 1793, Correspondence of George Chalmers, Add. MSS 22900, ff. 195–6.

⁵⁹ See the editorial by John Wells, writing as ‘Anglus’, in *Bahama Gazette*, 12 July 1791.

⁶⁰ Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 25 June 1793, CO23/32/116–7.

⁶¹ *Bahama Gazette*, 2 July 1793; Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 17 July 1793, CO23/32/124.

⁶² Dubois, *Avengers*, 155–9 (quotation at 157); see also Blackburn, *Overthrow*, 215–6.

⁶³ Proclamation by Lord Dunmore, 16 July 1793, in *Bahama Gazette*, 19 July 1793; Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 17 July 1793, CO23/32/124.

condemned at the Nassau vice-admiralty court, and few privateers had any great scruples regarding the sale of free foreign blacks as slaves.⁶⁴

The situation was further complicated by an influx of refugees who had fled Le Cap in their thousands in the wake of the fighting. A few of these émigrés expressed interest in settling in the Bahamas ‘if they could obtain Lands’. But while many Bahamian whites found it easy to sympathise with ‘French Gentlemen’ who had supposedly been ‘obliged to abandon their Country on Account of their Loyalty and attachment to their Sovereign,’ accommodating the slaves who accompanied them was a rather more troubling notion.⁶⁵

With the benefit of a few years’ hindsight, Bahamian slaveholders would vigorously condemn Dunmore for not acting earlier and more decisively to deal with ‘the incredible Number of French Prisoners and passengers’ that arrived in the islands from 1793 onwards.⁶⁶ But if Dunmore’s initial response to the complex and volatile situation in Saint-Domingue in mid-1793 was in some respects uncertain and ambivalent, so was that of many other people. The Assembly passed a new Militia Act as well as ‘An Act for laying certain Rates, Duties and impositions on all French Negroes and other French persons of Colour, now within these Islands or who may hereafter be brought within the same.’ But in August, the House also declared itself to be ‘penetrated by motives of Compassion and Humanity towards the unfortunate French people, who are daily brought in here by the Armed Vessels fitted out from these Islands.’ Since many were ‘destitute of the common Necessaries of Life’, the governor was urged to provide some kind of relief for them.⁶⁷

John Wells wrote in July that ‘human nature stands appalled at the late dreadful Scenes of Conflagration & Murder which have desolated the most valuable Colony that ever belonged to an European Nation.’ With some prescience, he declared that ‘the Idea of a Sable Republic in St. Domingo’, in which ‘People of Colour’ would

⁶⁴ The first advertisement for the sale of French slaves condemned at the vice-admiralty court, including ‘Servants, Field Slaves, Tradesmen and Sailors’, appears in *Bahama Gazette*, 28 June 1793. An account of how a Bahamian privateer ‘piratically boarded’ an American ship carrying French refugees from Le Cap to Charleston, seizing ‘negroes, cash and plate’, including at least two free people, appears in *State Gazette of South Carolina*, 7 September 1793.

⁶⁵ Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 17 July 1793, CO23/32/124; Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 18 December 1793, CO23/33/43; see also ‘Outline of a Plan for the Settlement of the Bahamas by means of French immigrants’, enclosure in Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 2 January 1797, CO23/35/97–8.

⁶⁶ Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 14 September 1793, CO23/32/153.

⁶⁷ Journal of the General Assembly, 8 August 1793, CO23/32/208; ‘List of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly’, 1793 session, CO23/32/168.

‘combine their Efforts for the attainment of Emancipation and Independence, strikes my mind as neither a very improbable nor very distant Event in this Age of Revolutions.’ But Wells was decidedly equivocal about such a prospect. He considered there to be ‘among the Coloured people of St. Domingo... many Characters of superior... Intelligence [whose] Minds have been highly cultivated; and whose general Conduct in private and public life give an earnest of promptitude[,] ability and firmness.’⁶⁸

Dunmore might also have claimed in mitigation the lack of instructions from London during the critical months. He received official circulars dated up to March sometime between the end of June and 17 July, and apparently did not see Dundas’s letter of 10 August until December.⁶⁹ Indeed, the British government’s own uncertainty and confusion regarding the situation in Saint-Domingue arguably contributed to the long delays in formulating and implementing a policy of intervention. In particular, the status of Saint-Domingue’s increasingly influential free coloured population, granted full French citizenship in 1792, posed a thorny problem. Their support, especially in the Southern and Western Provinces, might well prove essential to the success of a British occupation. But Dundas also gave weight to the profound concerns expressed by West Indians such as Bryan Edwards as to the potential effects upon British colonies like Jamaica of acknowledging the civil rights of free people of colour in Saint-Domingue. Moreover, the European theatre always had priority over the Caribbean, and the situation in Flanders and elsewhere may also have served to divert a divided cabinet’s attention. Continental concerns were certainly central to the reduction of the projected 10,000 strong West Indian expedition under Sir Charles Grey to a mere 6,000 men.⁷⁰

While London vacillated, British policy was overtaken by events in Saint-Domingue. On 29 August, Sonthonax issued a decree abolishing slavery in the Northern Province, with Polverel shortly following suit in the south and west of the colony.⁷¹ The same day, Toussaint Louverture, still styling himself ‘General of the

⁶⁸ Wells to Chalmers, Nassau, 19 July 1795, Correspondence of George Chalmers, Add. MSS 22900, ff. 195–6.

⁶⁹ Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 17 July 1793, CO23/32/124; Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 14 December 1793, CO23/33/14.

⁷⁰ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 84–6.

⁷¹ Dubois, *Avengers*, 163–4.

Armies of the King', proclaimed to the enslaved that 'I have undertaken vengeance. I want Liberty and Equality to reign in Saint-Domingue. I work to bring them into existence. Unite yourselves to us, brothers, and fight with us for the same cause.'⁷²

Confronted with the spectre of 'revolutionary emancipationism', the representatives of the Jamaican plantocracy approved Governor Sir Adam Williamson's decision to attempt an aggressive solution through military intervention. 600 redcoats left Jamaica on 9 September, landing at Jérémie in the Southern Province on 20 September to shouts of 'Vivent les Anglais.' Two days later, French officers surrendered the crucial Môle Saint Nicolas naval base at the western end of the North Province to a token British force without a fight. These and subsequent British successes at the end of 1793 prompted Dundas to order two further regiments to Saint-Domingue in mid-December.⁷³

White Bahamians were generally delighted and not a little surprised by the news. Wells found the spectacle of 'the Inhabitants of St Domingo placing themselves under the protection of England' to be 'one of the most striking' of all 'the Crowd of unlooked for Events that mark the present Times.' His earlier prophecy of a 'Sable Republic' apparently forgotten, he now looked forward to the 'immediate prospect of Emolument' that would be presented by 'the Event of St. Domingo becoming a British Colony.' Writing to congratulate Dundas, Dunmore expressed the hope that the Môle Saint Nicolas 'will never be given up. It is the Key to the whole Island and may be called the Gibraltar of the West Indies.'⁷⁴

However, the expedition's initial success rapidly had unforeseen consequences for the Bahamas. The initial British landing in September was made possible by the dispersal of the French naval squadron at Saint-Domingue in July and August.⁷⁵ Towards the end of the latter month, Dunmore received reports from Philadelphia 'that an Attack is meditated on the Islands under your Lordships Government, by the whole or a part of the French Fleet from Cape Francois now in the ports of the United States.' By October, he was reporting that 'the force intended against this place'

⁷² Quoted in Dubois, *Avengers*, 176; see also James, *Black Jacobins*, 102.

⁷³ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 96–9, 105–8, 111.

⁷⁴ Wells to Chalmers, Nassau, 12 October 1793, Correspondence of George Chalmers, Add. MSS 22900, f. 197; Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 9 October 1793, CO23/32/159.

⁷⁵ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 98.

consisted of 2,000 men to be embarked on over a dozen vessels, including two 74-gun ships of the line.⁷⁶

Dunmore quickly became thoroughly preoccupied, and seemingly invigorated by the ‘constant expectation of a visit from them damned restless republicans’. He eagerly set about ‘making every exertion in my power for the Safety and protection of this place’, commandeering privateers in port and mustering the militia, of whom he proudly wrote that ‘I never saw people turn out with more alacrity, or take more pains to make themselves perfect in Military Discipline.’ Even after recalling a company stationed at Turks Island, the regular garrison at this point consisted of ‘only 230 Men of the 47th Regiment.’ Nonetheless, Dunmore judged that ‘had we a Sufficient Number of small Arms... we should be able, when the Privateers returns into port, to Muster about 1200 Men Whites and free Blacks, exclusive of the Regulars.’ By the end of September, he was confident that ‘we shall be able to give the Enemy a pretty warm Reception.’⁷⁷

Dunmore had many reasons to overplay the threat of French attack. The prospect of battle undoubtedly appealed to his pugnacious temperament, offering him both a share of the glory that seemed imminent elsewhere in the West Indies, and the chance to redeem his military reputation after the Virginian fiasco. He had spent much of the last twenty years in conflict with republicans, and he was well aware that many of his old enemies in America sympathised with the French. But in addition, the ‘considerable alarm’ induced by the prospect of invasion offered opportunities to strengthen his position as governor of the Bahamas. The emergency could be offered to Whitehall as a post hoc justification for the spiralling cost of his lavish programme of military fortifications, as well as affording an excuse for pressing on with his ‘Works’ regardless of increasingly stringent instructions to the contrary. The lucrative contracts for these projects were at the heart of an extensive network of patronage through which Dunmore sustained his base of support in the colony.⁷⁸ Above all, of course, ‘the dread of our country becoming the theatre of such horrors as have been witnessed in St Domingo’ might be expected to induce (almost) ‘all ranks of

⁷⁶ George Hammond to Dunmore, Philadelphia, 14 August 1793, CO23/32/155; Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 9 October 1793, CO23/32/159.

⁷⁷ Dunmore to Chalmers, Nassau, 16 December 1793, Correspondence of George Chalmers, Add. MSS 22900, f. 210; Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 14 September 1793, CO23/32/153; Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 17 December 1793, CO23/33/16.

⁷⁸ See pp. 228–30 below.

inhabitants' to put aside their political differences, at a time when the Loyalist opposition in the Assembly had just succeeded in wringing the first major concessions from the governor.⁷⁹

However, the French onslaught never materialised. At the end of November, Dunmore rather curtly advised London of news that the expedition had been abandoned following a mutiny in the French fleet. Without concrete evidence from French sources, it is impossible to entirely dismiss the invasion scare. But, as Wells noted at the time, it is hard to give much credence to the idea that so many resources were to be diverted to the Bahamas at a time when Republican forces in Saint-Domingue were hard pressed, and a major British taskforce was embarked for the French Windward Islands.⁸⁰

The potential for Dunmore to extract political capital from the invasion scare was in any case undermined by the impossibility of sustaining an atmosphere of perpetual crisis into the following year. In 1794, both domestic and external prospects would seem relatively bright for the Bahamian elite. With the arrival of Grey's expedition, British military success in the Caribbean continued. Between March and May, Martinique, St Lucia and Guadeloupe were occupied. In Saint-Domingue, a combined land and naval assault saw the capitulation of Port-au-Prince on 3 June.⁸¹ By May, Dunmore had received instructions 'for opening a Commercial Intercourse with such parts of the Island of St. Domingo as are, or shall be' under British control. In June, American provision ships began to appear once again in Nassau, alleviating the problem of food shortages.⁸² Although it is difficult to believe that the problem entirely disappeared, complaints about French privateering in 1794 are notably scarce by comparison with the previous and subsequent years.

Simultaneously, developments in France and the Caribbean had generated an intense political backlash in Britain against abolitionism. Wilberforce refrained from presenting a general abolition bill in 1794, and his proposal for prohibiting the supply

⁷⁹ *Bahama Gazette*, 18 October 1793.

⁸⁰ Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 27 November 1793, CO23/33/1; Wells to Chalmers, Nassau, 12 October 1793, Correspondence of George Chalmers, Add. MSS 22900, ff. 197–8.

⁸¹ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 114; Michael Duffy, 'World-Wide War and British Expansion, 1789–1815', in Marshall, ed., *British Empire*, 2:188.

⁸² Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau, 21 May 1794, 11 June 1794, CO23/33/88, 99.

of slaves to foreign colonies met with no success.⁸³ Chalmers advised his Bahamian employers in June that ‘the back of the business had been already broken’ by ‘a great and decisive majority [in the House of Lords] who were adverse to the Abolition.’ A few months later he was still more forthright, confidently declaring that ‘amid the Din of War and the tumult of innovation we no longer hear any thing of the Slave Trade – ... a Subject, which no longer interests the World.’⁸⁴

Likewise, the fear of slave rebellion appears to have temporarily vanished, or at least faded into the background, in the perspective of Bahamian whites during 1794. But without the distraction of external or internal challenges, it was not long before the colonial elite’s political tensions and conflicts resurfaced. Dunmore had thoroughly alienated the new Chief Justice, Stephen DeLancey, and Attorney General Moses Franks and Secretary of the Council Adam Chrystie were both criticising the governor to London in increasingly explicit terms. Dundas repeatedly censured his conduct, and became particularly frustrated by the seemingly endless delays and ever-increasing expenditure involved in Dunmore’s various construction projects.⁸⁵ In February 1794, Dunmore was alarmed by the contents of two anonymous letters sent from London to Bahamian merchants, warning that the governor was very much out of favour with the Secretary of State, and that payment of his Bills upon the Treasury was ‘very doubtful.’⁸⁶

As discussed in chapter four above, Dunmore had effectively admitted defeat in his bitter battle with the legislature over control of the public revenues in September 1793, and thereafter the level of state manumissions fell off dramatically. Now, his opponents sought to realise their other longstanding demand, for a dissolution of the Assembly that had been originally elected during John Maxwell’s governorship in 1785. A ‘Bill to Limit the Duration of Assemblies’ had passed in 1792. Although the King had vetoed this measure by Order in Council, Dundas had made it clear that a

⁸³ Blackburn, *Overthrow*, 147–50; David Patrick Geggus, ‘British Opinion and the Emergence of Haiti, 1791–1805’, in Walvin, ed., *Slavery and British Society*, 123–8.

⁸⁴ Chalmers to Committee of Correspondence, 19 June 1794, 8 November 1794, Letters of George Chalmers, Colonial Agent 1792–1803, microfilm in BDA, ff. 56–57, 63.

⁸⁵ DeLancey to Dundas, Nassau, 7 January 1794, CO23/33/13; ‘Protest of Stephen DeLancey’, Minutes of Council, 18 January 1794, CO23/33/64; Franks to Dundas, Nassau, 22 September 1794, 10 June 1794, CO23/33/125–7, 97–8; Franks to Dundas, Nassau, 27 November 1794, CO23/34/293; Chrystie to Dundas, Nassau, 27 November 1793, 22 June 1794, CO23/33/2–3, 104–6; Dundas to Dunmore, London, 20 January 1794, 19 February 1794, 19 June 1794, CO23/33/7, 10, 83–4.

⁸⁶ Dunmore to Dundas, Nassau 18 February 1794, CO23/33/53; Anonymous letters, London, 5 August 1793, CO23/33/54.

subsequent bill would be acceptable provided it did not impose a maximum term of less than seven years.⁸⁷ With such a step seemingly only a matter of time, Dunmore finally dissolved the Assembly in September 1794.⁸⁸ It is an exaggeration to suggest that the subsequent election ‘removed all traces of a pro-Dunmore faction in the House’:⁸⁹ members such as John O’Halloran, Samuel Mackey, and Thomas North were consistent supporters of the governor. But the composition of the new legislature certainly confirmed that the balance of political power in the colony was swinging in favour of explicitly plantocratic interests.

Controversy immediately ensued over the legitimacy of the elections held on Long Island and Abaco. The outcome of a series of narrow votes was that two members ‘particularly attached to the violent party in the House of Assembly’ were admitted, whereas three others ‘of very different sentiments’ were not permitted to take their seats. The result was ‘a decided Majority’ for Dunmore’s opponents, and he dissolved the Assembly once more just ten days after it first met. In familiar terms, his message to the House expressed his ‘infinite concern... that the Steps adopted by this present Assembly... have had a tendency to produce Effects injurious to the Constitution and the People at large.’ The legislators had ‘invaded the Prerogative of the Executive Power... and... daringly usurped to themselves the most sacred and important Rights of the Crown.’⁹⁰

For most of the next twelve months, Dunmore simply governed without an Assembly, evading the expiry of the annual Revenue Act via the novel expedient of a ‘perpetual Revenue Bill’ passed during the reign of George II. But this step precluded any legislative initiative, and did little to shore up his waning credibility. The votes of the Assembly had been published in the *Bahama Gazette*, and rumours circulated that an order for Dunmore’s recall was either imminent or had actually been issued.⁹¹

⁸⁷ ‘List of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Bahama Islands’, 1792 Session, CO23/32/12–15; Dundas to Dunmore, London, 16 July 1793, CO23/32/115.

⁸⁸ Contrary to the claim in Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 176, echoed in Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:203, the dissolution of 1794 was not precipitated by London’s approval of a Septennial Act in that year. In fact, the Assembly would pass a resolution in March 1796 on the importance of Dunmore assenting to such a bill; see CO23/34/272.

⁸⁹ Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 176.

⁹⁰ Dunmore to Portland, Nassau, 7 March 1795, CO23/34/8; Journals of the General Assembly, 29 September 1794, CO23/34/39–40.

⁹¹ Dunmore to Portland, Nassau, 7 March 1795, CO23/34/8; Edwards to Chalmers, Nassau, 22 October 1794; Wells to Chalmers, 27 October 1794, Correspondence of George Chalmers, Add. MSS 22900, ff. 260–61, 264; *Bahama Gazette*, 7 October 1794, 10 October 1794.

In December, George Chalmers wrote to the Duke of Portland, who had replaced Dundas as Secretary of State, presenting a bleak summary of the situation in the Bahamas:

The Charges which were incurred, for putting those Islands in a State of defence remain ever unprovided for. The revenue for the Support of the government no longer exists. The temporary Laws are now expired. The Governor and the Delegates, whom the people chose, and in whom they Confide, are at open Warfare on popular rights. And confusion having thus commenced is leading on to Anarchy, with all its miseries.⁹²

By the beginning of 1795, therefore, internal conflict had resulted in political paralysis. The Bahamian colonial regime was singularly ill-equipped to deal with the crisis it was about to face.

⁹² Chalmers to Portland, London, 25 December 1794, CO23/33/143.

III: 'The most dreadful Alarms': 1795–6

1795 was a disastrous year for Britain, in terms of both the European struggle with France and the Atlantic empire. By May, British forces had been expelled from continental Europe, and the success of French arms destroyed the First Coalition soon after, with the United Provinces conquered, and Prussia, Spain and Sweden making peace.⁹³

Notwithstanding the apparent successes of Grey's expedition in 1794, the tide was already turning in the West Indies by the end of the year. In February, the Parisian National Assembly had enthusiastically embraced the arguments of a multi-racial delegation from Saint-Domingue 'for the role of emancipation in the larger epic battle of Republican France against its enemies.' Sonthonax's emancipation decree was endorsed and extended, with the declaration 'that slavery is abolished throughout the territory of the Republic... all men, without distinction of color, will enjoy the rights of French citizens.'⁹⁴ As news of this development reached the Caribbean in the second half of 1794, the character of the war was transformed. The thinly spread British forces struggled to cope with the novel and potent French weapon of revolutionary emancipationism.

In Saint-Domingue, Toussaint Louverture and his 4,000 veteran troops had finally come over to the Republican side in mid-1794.⁹⁵ Disease was taking a serious toll on the British forces, and for much of 1795, it was all that newly-appointed Governor Sir Adam Williamson could do to hold on to the areas the British controlled.⁹⁶

A small expedition led by Victor Hugues landed at Guadeloupe in April 1794, and by December British troops had been expelled from the island and slavery abolished. In March 1795, Republican landings prompted revolts in Grenada and St Vincent, and St Lucia was recaptured by the French in June. With the rising of the

⁹³ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 187; Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower*, 136–56; Gunther Rothenberg, *The Napoleonic Wars* (London: Cassell, 1999), 32–3.

⁹⁴ Dubois, *Colony of Citizens*, 159–60 (M. J. Mavidal & M. E. Laurent, eds., *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860, première série (1787–1799)*, (Paris, 1962), 84:276–85, quoted at 160).

⁹⁵ David Patrick Geggus, "'From His Most Catholic Majesty to the Godless Republic': the 'volte-face' of Toussaint Louverture and the ending of slavery in Saint Domingue", *Revue Française D'Histoire D'Outre-Mer*, 65 (1978), 481–99.

⁹⁶ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 121–2, 128–30, 151–6.

Trelawney Maroons of Jamaica in August, a general crisis of Britain's West Indian empire seemed imminent.⁹⁷

For the Bahamas, this sharp reversal of British fortunes manifested itself initially in a marked intensification of French privateering. Guadeloupe now became a major base of operations for the 'Republican Corsairs' that destroyed or captured 1,800 vessels from 1794–8.⁹⁸ By October 1794, the British naval contingent on the Jamaica Station was under-strength by 600 men, and was struggling to protect the ports of Jamaica and Saint-Domingue, let alone Nassau and the far-flung Bahamian Out Islands.⁹⁹

In the same month, the *Somerset*, carrying the whole of Exuma's cotton crop, had been taken 'in sight of [Denys Rolle's] Plantation House' by a privateer commissioned at Guadeloupe and fitted out at Charleston 'for this very Purpose'. Immediately prior to this exploit, the privateer had rode at anchor off the northern end of Long Island for three days, where it had captured a fishing boat containing two or three 'negroes', presumably slaves, and a free coloured man named Jerry Stuart. All but one of the blacks were 'dismissed', before a party of islanders led by 'Colonel Deveaux' surprised a landing party and captured five of the ship's crew. Deveaux promptly sent 'a message... to the Captain of the Privateer, demanding the other Negro, and threatening to hang every French-man on the beach in case of refusal.' But although 'the Negro was restored immediately', his mind had apparently been 'poisoned and contaminated' by his exposure to 'the enthusiastic emissaries of the new philosophy'; that night, he 'carried off two other boats from another quarter to the Privateer.'¹⁰⁰

In January 1795, Rolle wrote to Dundas that the Out Islands were 'infested' by as many as twenty French privateers, imploring that the Bahamas receive 'Protection necessary for their existence as a Colony.' Chief Justice DeLancey had recently been captured at sea, 'deprived of all his Cloathes except those he wore', and set adrift '9 miles from Land in an open Boat.' In view of the 'great Scarcity of White

⁹⁷ Dubois, *Colony of Citizens*, 192–205; Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 180–94; Duffy, 'World-Wide War', 188–9.

⁹⁸ Dubois, *Colony of Citizens*, 241–6.

⁹⁹ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 153.

¹⁰⁰ Rolle to Dundas, Tytherly, 1 January 1795, CO23/34/282–3; 'Extract of a Letter from Exuma', 2 October 1794, *Bahama Gazette*, 7 October 1794; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 26 May 1795, *Bahama Gazette*, 29 May 1795; *Bahama Gazette*, 29 October 1793.

Inhabitants', Rolle's overseer had been 'obliged to keep a strict Watch every Night of several Negroes.' Another privateer had been seizing slaves from Long Island, and Rolle was sure that a 'small force might strip all the Out Islands of their Negroes.'¹⁰¹

A memorial received by Portland in March painted a similar picture. The 'exposed and defenceless' Out Islands were 'frequently reduced to great distress for want of provisions,' since 'Communications between the different Islands' had been 'in a great degree stopped.' French privateers had made 'numberless Captures... the Plantations have been pillaged and the Slaves carried off.'¹⁰²

By April, Crooked Island was subject to what amounted to a virtual blockade. A French ship, believed to be the *Delaware* from Charleston, prowled in the channel between Crooked Island and Long Island each day, before anchoring at night in the bay opposite James Moss's plantation house. After this vessel took four prizes in as many days, the planters of Crooked Island wrote to both Dunmore and Rear Admiral Ford at Saint-Domingue, pleading for support. Moss feared that 'this Privateer meeting with such success will soon send us a swarm of them', and a further memorial addressed to the governor in May spoke of 'the Enemy's Cruisers... almost continually appearing.' Since, in the absence of a British warship, 'it would be madness to risque any Vessel or property to this Island', Moss wondered 'when we may see another Vessel from Nassau.'¹⁰³

The financial and material impact of war on the Out Island plantation economy is impossible to quantify, but it should not be understated. In February 1794, a group of 'Planters, Merchants and others' had warned that without 'the supplies and Provisions and Lumber which these Islands have been accustomed to receive from the Continent of North America... it is impossible for the Inhabitants to subsist their Slaves, and carry on the business of their Plantations having been cut off... by the French Cruizers and Privateers.' Their stark conclusion was that 'the Planters of this

¹⁰¹ Rolle to Dundas, Tytherly, 1 January 1795, CO23/34/282-3.

¹⁰² 'Memorial of the Planters, Merchants & others interested in the Bahama Islands', 16 March 1794, CO23/34/308.

¹⁰³ Memorial of Crooked Island Planters to Lord Dunmore, 8 April 1795, CO23/34/49; Memorial of Crooked Islanders to Admiral Ford, 9 April 1795, William Moss to James Moss, Crooked Island, 18 April 1795, Force Papers, LC, Series 8A, #11; Memorial of Crooked Island Planters, Nassau, 9 May 1795, CO23/34/48.

Colony have been saved from Ruin' by foreign imports of food.¹⁰⁴ But even when available, such imports came at a high and growing cost. Food prices had already risen sharply during the 1780s. In 1794, one planter was bemoaning that 'We all want to make a great crop, to get rich at once, and leave the d__d country. It is seldom considered that when such crops are made, they are applied to the purchase of pork at 30 dollars the barrel, corn at 12s the bushel'; since 1790, the price of corn had increased by half, while that of pork had almost doubled.¹⁰⁵

Nor was this a propitious moment to contemplate extracting more labour from the enslaved workforce in the interests of self-sufficiency, with Out Island planters 'exceedingly alarmed' by the prospect 'of a descent being made and an Insurrection excited among their Slaves.' Although there is no evidence that the French ever made a serious attempt at 'raising a Ferment among' Out Island slaves, slaveholders there had good reason to be apprehensive. If communication with Nassau was cut off, the handful of poorly-armed whites would have had little chance against a determined rising. Dunmore candidly admitted in May that 'the present State of our Stores does not admit of my granting any supply for the defence of the Out Islands' against both external and internal dangers.¹⁰⁶

Many Out Island residents and proprietors complained that the security of New Providence was unfairly prioritised at their expense. But ultimately, the Bahamian state simply did not have, and had never had, anything like the resources required for effective protection of the entire archipelago, and by this time, Nassau had very real security concerns of its own.

On 17 April, Dunmore advised the Council that he 'had last night received information of a very alarming nature, respecting an insurrection likely to be attempted by the French Negroes on this Island.'¹⁰⁷ Even by Bahamian standards, the details of the 1795 insurrection scare are sketchy. A few weeks later, the governor wrote that 'some French Negroes' had planned 'to destroy the Town by fire, liberate

¹⁰⁴ 'Memorial of the undersigned Planters, Merchants and others, for and in behalf of themselves, and of the whole body of the Planters of this Colony resident upon the Out Islands', New Providence, 6 February 1794, CO23/33/65.

¹⁰⁵ Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 172; *Bahama Gazette*, 21 March 1794, 9 April 1790.

¹⁰⁶ Memorial of Crooked Island Planters, Nassau, 9 May 1795, CO23/34/48; Memorial of Crooked Islanders to Admiral Ford, 9 April 1795, Force Papers, LC, Series 8A #11; Dunmore to Portland, Nassau, 10 May 1795, CO23/34/45.

¹⁰⁷ Minutes of Council, 17 April 1795, CO23/35/8.

the French Prisoners and Massacre the Inhabitants.’¹⁰⁸ In another account, forwarded to Chalmers by Josiah Tattnall, the conspirators had ultimately planned ‘to take the Property & Shipping to St Domingo’ after laying waste to Nassau. Although by the 17th, the ‘Ringleaders’ had been ‘apprehended’, and were ‘now in custody in order to be examined’, very few further details of the plot were apparently forthcoming. Peter Edwards, who on 21 April was ‘taking examinations respecting the circumstances’ reported that these ringleaders were part of a group of ‘about twenty or thirty brought in... by one of our Privateers.’ According to Tattnall’s anonymous correspondent, they had been ‘Active in St. Domingo’ before being allowed to ‘become private Property’ in the Bahamas. A second letter forwarded to Chalmers by Tattnall adds the detail that the conspiracy ‘was discovered by one of our own Negroes who was asked to Join them in the attack.’¹⁰⁹

These rather vague reports, some of questionable reliability, represent all that is known about the circumstances of the alleged conspiracy of April 1795. In some respects, the very silence of the sources seems loaded with significance, albeit of a kind that is very difficult to interpret. After relating what had happened in a mere sixty words on 10 May, Dunmore’s despatches to London do not mention the incident again. There seems to be no trace in the official records of the round of interrogations, trials and executions that might be expected to follow the discovery of a slave conspiracy, especially in the heightened atmosphere of the time. The only reference of any kind to any such proceedings comes in a letter written fully two years later, when Edwards recalled that one of the men involved had ‘escaped the Sentence of Transportation’ by ‘turning King’s evidence.’¹¹⁰

However, the evidence, such as it is, does allow us to infer something of the incident’s profound impact on the mindset of white Bahamians. For John Wells, writing at the end of April, it had seemed that ‘we were exempted in these Islands so far, from the Distress which afflict some of our Sister Colonies. But in the present unsettled time, it is difficult to form any Estimate of how long this Indulgence is to be allowed us.’ To others, it seemed that time had already run out. A sense of impending crisis is evident in the tone of the letters written to Tattnall, two months after the

¹⁰⁸ Dunmore to Portland, Nassau, 10 May 1795, CO23/34/45.

¹⁰⁹ Edwards to Chalmers, Nassau, 21 April 1795, ‘Extracts of a letter from the Bahama Islands dated Nassau 22 June 1795’, ‘Extract of another letter of the same Date’, Chalmers Papers, JCBL, reel 1.

¹¹⁰ Edwards to Chalmers, Nassau, 1 September 1797, Chalmers Papers, JCBL, reel 2.

discovery of the plot. There was ‘very Little Communication with Our Out Islands, Owing to the number of French Privateers that Swarm about Us – the Crops that are made Cannot be brought to Market for the most of our small Craft are already taken by them.’ Nassau itself was still ‘subject... to the most dreadful Alarms’, so that ‘we are now obliged, Regulars (the few we have...) and the Militia to be upon Duty every Night.’¹¹¹

The Bahamian elite were rudely awoken from their previous complacency regarding the influx of French-speaking blacks since 1793, and in particular the indiscriminate seizure of such people by privateers looking to have them condemned as slaves at the vice-admiralty court. Edwards was not alone in suddenly realising that ‘French Negroes... have been very impolitically admitted into this Country.’ In May, the Grand Jury complained of ‘the continual importation and influx of French Negroes’.¹¹² Dunmore now required ‘all Persons... possessed of French Negroes to deliver into the Secretary’s Office... an exact list of all such Negroes’, but nevertheless, the view that ‘We are to thank Our Governor for all our Misfortunes’ apparently gained wide currency. With the benefit of hindsight, Dunmore was condemned for having ‘Contrary to advice and good Sense Suffered the French Negroes... to Land Here, & become private Property.’ Since the governor had ‘also thought proper to deprive this Country of [an Assembly]’, there was currently no legal body with the ‘Power to get rid of them.’¹¹³ As was discussed above, there is little evidence that anyone in the Bahamas expressed much concern about the lucrative practice of selling captured ‘French Negroes’ before April 1795. Nevertheless, yet another charge had been added to the long list of Bahamian slaveholders’ grievances against Dunmore.

In any case, what was perhaps most disturbing for Bahamian slaveholders about the situation in mid-1795 was not simply the presence of a relatively small group of Francophone blacks harbouring ‘atrocious designs’. Only ‘Ring leaders’ and ‘principals’ had been arrested: the full extent of the conspiracy, and the degree to

¹¹¹ Wells to Chalmers, Nassau, 30 April 1795, ‘Extracts of a letter from the Bahama Islands dated Nassau, 22 June 1795’, ‘Extract of another letter of the same date’, Chalmers Papers, JCBL, reel 1.

¹¹² Edwards to Chalmers, Nassau, 21 April 1795; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 26 May 1795, *Bahama Gazette*, 29 May 1795.

¹¹³ Minutes of Council, 17 April 1795, CO23/35/8; ‘Extracts of a letter from the Bahama Islands dated Nassau, 22 June 1795’, ‘Extract of another letter of the same date’, Chalmers Papers, JCBL, reel 1.

which it had involved the wider black community were unclear. If the plotters had been betrayed by one of ‘our Negroes’ who had been ‘asked to Join them in the attack’, then perhaps they had approached others with more success.¹¹⁴

Slaveholders were surely being wilfully naïve when they insisted that ‘we were happy in Our Slaves ‘till those French Negroes landed among us.’ There had been fears of insurrection at least two years earlier, and black Bahamians had hardly been quiescent in the 1780s. But even this disingenuous narrative of how ‘those French Wretches have infused the Idea of Freedom among a Set of Innocent Slaves, who were Contented in their Station, & thought themselves happy here’ revealed growing concerns at what seemed to be a qualitative change in the mood of the English-speaking black majority. At the end of May, the Grand Jury warned that the ‘seditious discourses’ of ‘French Negroes... tend to corrupt the manners of, and to disseminate their wicked and dangerous example and practice among our own Slaves and other People of Colour in this Country.’¹¹⁵

The situation in Nassau was further exacerbated by the presence of ‘so many French Prisoners... confined on board the Prison ships in this Harbour.’ The identity of these ‘French Prisoners’ is somewhat enigmatic, but they included ‘Men whose conduct in their own country, requires a strict guard be kept on them while in this’, and ‘many... were either Blacks or Mulattoes’. By early 1796, they had managed ‘to escape and carry off Vessels from the Harbour’ at least twice. In February, when ‘one of the Prison Ships was attempted to be set on fire by the Prisoners on board’, the Assembly moved an Address to the governor bemoaning ‘the state of alarm in which the Inhabitants of this Town are kept arising from the dread of those Prisoners.’¹¹⁶

After the prison ships were lost or damaged in a severe storm on 3 October 1796, the ‘seventy-six French prisoners of War’ were temporarily kept on shore, in ‘a House... so badly circumstanc’d in point of Security, as to create a great Alarm among the Inhabitants, that their Negroes should be corrupted by an Intercourse with

¹¹⁴ Dunmore to Portland, Nassau, 10 May 1795, CO23/34/45; ‘Extracts of a letter from the Bahama Islands dated Nassau, 22 June 1795’, ‘Extract of another letter of the same date’, Chalmers Papers, JCBL, reel 1.

¹¹⁵ ‘Extracts of a letter from the Bahama Islands dated Nassau, 22 June 1795’, Chalmers Papers, JCBL, reel 1; Presentments of the Grand Jury, 26 May 1795, *Bahama Gazette*, 29 May 1795.

¹¹⁶ Journals of the House of Assembly, 19 February 1796, CO23/34/260; *Bahama Gazette*, 30 July 1795; Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 13 November 1796, CO23/35/34–5; see also Presentments of the Grand Jury, 26 May 1795, *Bahama Gazette*, 29 May 1795.

the Prisoners.’¹¹⁷ Despite repeated efforts to exchange these captives for British prisoners of war, their numbers continued to increase; by July 1797, the Commissary of Prisoners reported that ‘there were now more than 150 persons of that description on board the prison ships.’ By this stage, many of the prisoners were Spanish rather than French, and it is notable that liberating the prison ships apparently did not feature in the plans of the conspirators of 1797.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, the continued proximity of enemy combatants ‘rendered in a great degree desperate from the Atrocity of their lives’ must have provided yet another source of chronic anxiety for Nassau’s white citizens.¹¹⁹

When the Assembly was finally recalled on 6 October 1795, its members ‘proceeded... with unexampled unanimity and dispatch’, displaying an ‘industry [that] has seldom been equalled.’ By the time Dunmore prorogued the House in March 1796, 34 new statutes had been enacted, and several major bills remained to be passed.¹²⁰ Unsurprisingly, the legislature was very much concerned with the implications of war and revolution in the Atlantic for the Bahamas. Along with the rather belated suspension of the ‘act for the encouragement of foreigners and strangers settling in these islands’, the most direct response to the alleged conspiracy was a measure to prohibit the sale and hire of slaves currently or previously owned by citizens or residents of France and its colonies. The preamble to this Act bluntly stated that ‘it is necessary, for the safety and tranquillity of these islands, that all communication between the slaves thereof and [such foreign] slaves and people of colour... should as much as possible be prevented.’ The owners of French slaves imported since February 1793 were required to register them with the Receiver General within three months, and any free non-white French person faced arrest and

¹¹⁷ Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 13 November 1796, CO23/35/34–5.

¹¹⁸ Hunt to Portland, Nassau, 14 July 1797, CO23/36/80.

¹¹⁹ Journals of the House of Assembly, 19 February 1796, CO23/34/260.

¹²⁰ Chalmers to Portland, London, 13 February 1796, CO23/34/324–5; [Wells] to Chalmers, Nassau, 1 January 1796, CO23/34/327; ‘List of Acts of the General Assembly of the Bahama Islands passed in Sessions 1795 and 1796’, CO23/34/127–9; *Votes of the Honourable House of Assembly*, 19 March 1796, 111–2.

imprisonment ‘until he or she shall cause himself or herself to be transported at his or her own expence.’¹²¹

A great deal of the new legislation addressed more general issues of external and internal security. With Bahamian whites now inclined to the view that ‘in a Period like the present, too much caution cannot be observed’, there was far less resistance to Loyalist slaveholders’ longstanding demands for ‘the most essential regulations of police’ and ‘a Revision of the Laws of these Islands, for governing Slaves and Free People of Colour’.¹²² Provision was made for the building of gaols and appointment of constables on the Out Islands for the first time. A new Police Act empowered the governor to deploy the militia as a night patrol, who were to ‘prevent... all tumultuous Meetings of Negroes and People of Colour’, as well as enforcing a 9 o’clock curfew on non-whites.’ Perhaps in view of Dunmore’s known penchant for flouting plantocratic norms of law enforcement, further clauses specified that men from the coloured militia companies might patrol only in the day, under the supervision of a constable, and were to have no powers of arrest over whites.¹²³

The completion of this ‘revision’ of the legal apparatus of repression and racial control was to be obstructed, for a final time, by the governor. Dunmore had prorogued the Assembly in December when it called for the dismissal and prosecution of Receiver General and Treasurer Philip Dumaresq. On reconvening in February 1796, the House drove Dumaresq out of office and eventually had him arrested and committed to gaol for contempt. Another adjournment soon followed, leaving bills for a comprehensive revision of the Bahamian slave code and the construction of a new prison and workhouse in Nassau in abeyance. However, by then, the Assembly had passed a series of resolutions directing colonial agent George Chalmers to deliver a detailed statement of their grievances against the governor to the Secretary of State, and also as a Humble Address to the King-in-Council. The order for Dunmore’s recall

¹²¹ Governor’s assent to ‘An act for suspending an act, intituled, *An act for the encouragement of foreigners and strangers settling in these islands*’, *Votes of the Honourable House of Assembly*, 14 December 1795, 75; ‘An Act to prohibit the selling, purchasing, hiring or employing, of certain foreign slaves’, 1795, 36 Geo. III, *Acts of Assembly* (1801), 41, 44–5.

¹²² ‘Petition from the inhabitants of Long Island’, *Votes of the Honourable House of Assembly*, 9 November 1795, 35; ‘Presentments of the Grand Jurors’, 30 August 1785, *Bahama Gazette*, 17 September 1785; ‘Presentments of the Grand Jury’, 25 February 1791, *Bahama Gazette*, 1 March 1791.

¹²³ ‘An Act for building Gaols, and appointing Gaolers and Constables, in the Several Islands and Districts therein mentioned’, 1795, 36 Geo. III, c. 1, *Acts of Assembly* (1806), 1:56–7; excerpt from the ‘Police Act’ passed 14 December 1795, in *Bahama Gazette*, 29 December 1795.

was signed in July, and his replacement, the former Irish MP John Forbes, arrived in Nassau as lieutenant governor on 17 September.¹²⁴

Notwithstanding his professed intent to ‘Conciliate all Parties’ and persuade them to ‘bury their political Animosities in Oblivion’, Forbes openly sided with Dunmore’s enemies, appointing prominent Loyalists to seats on the Council and government posts.¹²⁵ On 11 May 1797, he gave his fulsome approval to the comprehensive overhaul of Bahamian slave law that William Wylly had first introduced in the Assembly back in November 1795, commending its ‘wise and salutary Provisions’.¹²⁶

The somewhat misleadingly titled ‘Act to consolidate and bring into one Act, the several Laws relating to Slaves, and for giving them further Protection and Security...’ was apparently closely modelled on Jamaica’s 1792 Consolidated Slave Act, reproducing many clauses from the latter almost verbatim, albeit at times providing for more severe punishments.¹²⁷ Overall, the penal aspects of the 1797 statute were probably no harsher than those of the 1784 slave code, and there was certainly more of a semblance of due process attached to the infliction of capital punishment.¹²⁸ But the far greater length and scope of the new regulations clearly signalled an intention to exert increased scrutiny and control over the lives of enslaved

¹²⁴ *Votes of the Honourable House of Assembly*, 90–92, 101, 105–112; Portland to Dunmore, 8 July 1796, CO23/34/117; Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 16 October 1796, CO23/35/20. These resolutions, it should be noted, were probably no more than a pretext for Dunmore’s recall. The Duke of Portland had never forgiven his contribution to the fall of the Fox-North ministry in 1783. Moreover, Dunmore’s political clout in London had been diminished by the political retirement of his brother-in-law, the Marquess of Stafford, in 1794, and the scandal of his daughter Augusta’s illegal marriage to George III’s son Prince Augustus Frederick. See Selby, *Dunmore*, 67–9, 74.

¹²⁵ For instance, Stephen Haven, a Loyalist lawyer and representative for Nassau in the Assembly, the nephew of the last royal Chief Justice of South Carolina, was appointed Solicitor General. John Kelsall, an Exuma planter and Assembly member whose father had emigrated from Georgia, joined the Council. William Wylly became Chief Justice (entitling him to another seat on the Council), and Lieutenant Colonel of a new militia artillery regiment. See Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 2 January 1797, 26 February 1797, 28 February 1797, CO23/35/89, 111, 142; Portland to Forbes, London, 24 September 1797, CO23/35/189–90.

¹²⁶ *Journals of the Legislative Council*, 11 May 1797, CO23/37/33–4; 37 Geo. III, c. 2, *Acts of Assembly* (1806), 1:94–116; see also the detailed discussion of the Act in Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:208–11.

¹²⁷ For instance, the Jamaican Act specifies that ‘no slave... shall receive more than ten lashes at one time and for a single offence’ unless in the presence of an owner or other person responsible for him or her. The equivalent clause of the Bahamian statute sets a maximum of twenty lashes. See ‘Consolidated Slave Act of Jamaica’, 1792, in Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial* (1806), 2:379; *Acts of Assembly* (1806), 1:99.

¹²⁸ Cf. the regulations for the trial of slaves charged with criminal offences in ‘An Act for Governing Negroes, Mulattos, Mustees and Indians and for suspending several Acts herein mentioned’, 1784, 24 Geo. III, CO23/29/5, and those of 37 Geo. III, c. 2, *Acts of Assembly* (1806), 1:111–6.

people, to ensure that they remained ‘in proper subordination to the white inhabitants in general’. As well as a predictably extensive set of provisions for dealing with runaways, specific clauses targeted slaves’ independent economic activity, and criminalised such forms of sociability as gaming, drinking, and ‘riotous unlawful drumming or other noise’.¹²⁹

Notably, whereas the 1784 Act did not directly mention rebellion, the new law stressed how ‘absolutely necessary’ it was ‘that opportunities of committing rebellious conspiracies should as much as possible be taken away’. Now, ‘rebellious conspiracies, compassing or imagining the death of any white person’ were specifically identified as capital offences.¹³⁰

Manumission was not explicitly mentioned in the Consolidated Slave Act. Nor did it repeal the 1788 statute establishing the form of the ‘negro court’ that had presided over the peak years of state manumission from 1788–93. But the suspension of the 1784 slave code, to which the Act of 1788 was an amendment, left the legal status of the latter ambiguous at best. In any case, with the increasing political ascendancy of the ‘Gentlemen of Character & Property’, and the executive branch sympathetic to their agenda, there was little danger of renewed state interference in the legal status of enslaved Bahamians.

But although Loyalist slaveholders had made major political and legislative breakthroughs by 1797, they remained some distance from having constituted themselves as an unchallenged plantocratic elite. At this point, it must be emphasised that, contrary to the established view that Dunmore ‘united almost all assemblymen in opposition’ to his governorship,¹³¹ he was actually able to count on a substantial and consistent base of political support, especially from among the poorer conch whites of Eleuthera and Harbour Island. None of the Assembly’s resolutions of March 1796 censuring Dunmore secured a majority of more than three votes, and the final one, explicitly calling for his replacement, did not pass at all. Hence, Forbes reported that ‘at my arrival here I found Twelve on each Side of the House opposed to each other & the Speaker for my administration’. His predecessor had so successfully ‘*packed* the Assembly... with Common Carpenters, Shippers, & Masters of Wrecking vessels in

¹²⁹ 37 Geo. III, c. 2, *Acts of Assembly* (1806), 1:101, 101–7, 109–11, 108.

¹³⁰ 37 Geo. III, c. 2, *Acts of Assembly* (1806), 1:101, 111.

¹³¹ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:203; cf. Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 176–9; Prokopow, “‘To the Torrid Zones,’” 271.

exclusion of Gentlemen of Character & Property' that only procedural manoeuvring prevented the passage of 'an Address in the House of Assembly To His Lordship thanking him for his *wise & upright* Administration & censuring the Measure of his recall.'¹³²

Forbes wrote at some length about how 'his Lordship at great Expence to the British Treasury (concealed under the Items of Fortification, Gallies, &c. &c.)', to the extent of £150,000 'of British Money', had 'acquired a Considerable Influence in this Island. Among the lower Class Principally; by the Extinction of this system of *Peculation* About three Hundred Persons in Nassau of different Characters[?] & *Colours* are deprived of Advantages, considerable to them.'¹³³ Over the following months, Forbes would see his efforts to reform 'Lord D's corrupt System' repeatedly confounded by these 'Contemptible low Fellows'. The lieutenant governor boasted that 'all the respectable Men of the Colony with scarce an Exception are in my Support', but nonetheless Dunmore's sinister influence seemed to have 'pervaded every Grade & Rank'; singled out for particular criticism were 'the lower Order of Whites here'. In a revealing passage, he characterised the latter in the same terms used by Loyalists in the 1780s, as 'rather a lawless Crew; the Descendants of Pirates they have not departed from the Principles of their Ancestors...; between my Predecessor & these People a sort of Reciprocity of Abuse was established'.¹³⁴

The ensuing 'Party Contentions' were as fierce as anything seen since 1783, and one episode in particular deserves further attention. Discovering that 'Lord Dunmore had packed the Military Department in the same Manner which he had the Legislature, and that there were not Any [senior] Officers... on whom, in Case of Emergency, I could rely', Forbes decided to combine the two existing militia artillery companies into a new regiment, to be commanded by William Wyllly. However, after petitioning against Wyllly's appointment, on the grounds that they had traditionally enjoyed the right of electing their own officers, 'the Members of this Artillery Corps had the Presumption to intimate that sooner than obey Mr Wyllly they would lay down

¹³² *Votes of the Honourable House of Assembly*, 105–7; Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 19 November 1796, CO23/35/52–3 (Forbes's emphasis).

¹³³ Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 19 November 1796, CO23/35/53; Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 2 January 1797, CO23/35/94; Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 14 January 1797, CO23/35/103 (Forbes's emphasis).

¹³⁴ Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 2 January 1797, CO23/35/95; Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 20 February 1797, CO23/35/160.

their Arms on the Parade'. To prevent such a public protest, Forbes postponed the militia's quarterly muster scheduled for 31 December 1796. In response, and supposedly with the encouragement of 'Lord Dunmore's Party', captain Joseph Hunter 'published a Manifesto... under the Pretence of Company's Orders against my Authority as Governor, or rather an Invitation to Sedition and Mutiny'. According to Forbes, the acting commander of the militia, Robert Hunt, also President of the Council, had connived with Hunter's protest by calling the muster in the first place, and could be expected to constitute a court martial so as to guarantee his acquittal.¹³⁵

Three days later, Forbes instead convened a general court martial to try Hunter, who assembled 'the greatest Parts of the Members of His Company... in order, by their outrageous behaviour, to intimidate the Court'. On being discharged by the court martial, 'Hunter, *in his Uniform*, marched through Nassau *at the Head of his Corps*, behaving... in a most riotous Manner; and after huzzaing for some time before Lt Colonel Hunt's Door, proceeded to do the like before Lord Dunmore's House'. Hunt soon afterwards resigned his commission, supposedly to avoid having to preside over another court martial, and Hunter's company was disbanded.¹³⁶

This rather farcical episode was a stark illustration of how bitterly divided Bahamian whites remained by 1797. Moreover, it indicated, in a very public and dramatic fashion, how far these tensions had impacted on the cohesion and discipline of the colony's military forces. It was readily apparent that the militia might well prove neither very reliable nor efficient in enforcing the new 'regulations of Police'.

The state of the regular garrison was even more problematic. By February 1797, the 47th regiment was down to 110 men fit for duty, and their commanding officer was 'greatly impaired by his *Attachment to the Bottle*'.¹³⁷ But the arrival of their replacements later that month only presented new and more serious difficulties.

In the second half of 1795, Dundas had assembled an unprecedented projection of British military might overseas in an attempt to remedy the deteriorating situation in the West Indies. But despite successes elsewhere, the 'great expedition' of 1796 proved unable to win the war in Saint-Domingue, where 4,700 British troops died, mainly of disease, in that year alone. From September the redeployment of units from

¹³⁵ Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 26 February 1797, CO23/35/110–112.

¹³⁶ Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 26 February 1797, CO23/35/112–3 (Forbes's emphasis).

¹³⁷ Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 26 February 1797, CO23/35/110 (Forbes's emphasis).

Saint-Domingue contributed to the spread of a circum-Caribbean pandemic of what was probably yellow fever.¹³⁸ In November 1795, the 32nd regiment had been 954 strong. When they arrived in Nassau from Môle Saint Nicolas in February 1797, only 380 men remained, of whom a quarter were ill.¹³⁹

In spite of the Bahamian climate's salubrious reputation, the troops remained 'wretched beyond description', and the 'dreadful distemper' spread to the general population in May, killing over 200 people by September, when less than 40 soldiers were 'capable of doing duty'. One of the first casualties was Forbes, who died on 3 June, leaving Robert Hunt as acting governor.¹⁴⁰

Hunt was said to be an old man, 'not very well adapted to any Exertion', who 'had never heard an Enemy shot fired', and 'did not possess much Influence over the Inhabitants'. Eighteen months before, Dunmore had made him Chief Justice, only for Portland to veto the appointment.¹⁴¹ His recent quarrel with Forbes can only have further undermined his legitimacy as governor to Loyalists.

Thus, in the summer of 1797, with the colonial regime wracked by political conflict and disease, lacking an effective military force, and now seemingly leaderless, the Bahamas may well have seemed ripe for insurrection.

¹³⁸ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 188–97, 207, 347–54, 362, Table 14; Duffy, 'World-Wide War', 190.

¹³⁹ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 190; Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 28 February 1797, CO23/35/146; see also Peter Morgan, 'The 32nd Regiment in the Bahamas 1797–1799', *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society*, 21 (1999), 23–29.

¹⁴⁰ Hunt to Portland, Nassau, 8 September 1797, CO23/36/105; Parrish, 'Records', 258; Hunt to Portland, Nassau, 5 June 1797, CO23/36/69.

¹⁴¹ Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 26 February 1797, CO23/35/110; Dunmore to Portland, Nassau, 31 January 1795, CO23/34/107; Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 14 January 1795, CO23/35/102–3.

IV: 'To Fight and take the Country': the Conspiracy of 1797

Word of the conspiracy of 1797 first reached Nassau whites on the evening of Saturday 19 August, when a 'Negro Man' told Francis Montell, an officer in the Volunteer Engineer Company of the New Providence Militia, that 'he had been asked by a number of Negroes to join them in a rising against the white people, and to put themselves in the same situation the black people were in at the Cape'. On Sunday afternoon, the informant spoke to Montell again, reporting some details of the planned insurrection, and agreeing to lead him to the place where the conspirators intended to assemble that night. However, when Montell went to meet the man, he said that the would-be rebels had already met and dispersed. Because only twenty had come to the rendezvous 'instead of Seventy or Eighty who were expected – they had parted without doing any thing; but had agreed to meet on Monday night.'¹⁴²

Montell told Thomas North, the captain of the Engineers, about this on Sunday afternoon, and probably also several other militia officers.¹⁴³ For reasons that are not clear, North did not inform Governor Hunt until the night of Monday 21 August, and it was only then that a general alarm was raised. Hunt appraised Captain Mansergh, commander of the 32nd regiment garrisoned at Fort Charlotte, of the situation, 'requesting him to be vigilant, and if possible to double his Centinels'. The Militia were ordered 'to keep up constant Patroles all Night, from one end of the Town to the Other', and guards were stationed at the gaol. Two gunboats were positioned in the harbour to enfilade the Ordnance Stores should they be attacked. On the following day, the Council approved Hunt's proposal to employ from the militia 'a party of twelve or fourteen trusty men; to mount Guard every Evening, at Sunset at Fort Charlotte, and to do duty until Sun-rise.'¹⁴⁴ By then, however, the leaders of the conspiracy were under lock and key.

Sometime on Monday evening, the anonymous informant reported to Montell that he had again met with the conspirators, who now believed that 'the white people had got information of their intention', having overheard their owner, Alexander Wildgoos, mention the matter. Shortly after the informant had left, a group of blacks

¹⁴² Minutes of the Council, 22 August 1797, CO23/36/109.

¹⁴³ Minutes of the Council, 22 August 1797, CO23/36/108.

¹⁴⁴ Hunt to Portland, Nassau, 8 September 1797, CO23/36/104–5; Minutes of the Council, 22 August 1797, CO23/36/110.

passed Montell's home, and told him that the plotters had gone to a 'House hired by a Mulatto Fiddler, named Stephen in the Western Suburbs'. Montell went there with five men from the Engineer Company, and found a 'party of Negroes consisting of Seven Men and one Woman,' who were 'alarmed' when Montell entered the house, and concealed something under a bed. A search of the house revealed 'a fuse and a Musket or sword hid under the bed and a powder horn,' and the blacks were arrested and 'secured... in the Common Gaol.'¹⁴⁵

Two weeks later, Perpall, Tucker and Edgcombe went on trial, along with Tom Bethune and Tom Lockhart, in the manner prescribed by the new Consolidated Slave Act, before a five-man jury and two justices of the peace. All five were found guilty and sentenced to death, but Hunt subsequently commuted the sentences of Bethune and Lockhart to transportation.¹⁴⁶ In the absence of confessions, the convictions were based on the testimony of other slaves that they had been entreated by one or more of the accused men to join the planned insurrection.

According to these statements, Perpall 'gave a Feast' attended by 'a great number of other Negroes' on Sunday 6 August at the house he rented from the fiddler, Stephen Rogers. This event was ostensibly to celebrate his 'making up a Quarrel between him and his Wife', but also served as cover for inviting potential recruits to the conspiracy to a more select gathering the following Sunday. Over the course of the following week, slaves were approached individually by Bethune, Lockhart, Edgcombe and Perpall himself. By some accounts, Perpall and Tucker 'were the principal leaders, and the two Captains who consulted together', though the most detailed statement refers to Perpall as 'the Principal Leader' and Tucker as 'the next Captain'.¹⁴⁷

The conspirators' declared intention was no less than 'to *fight* and take the Country from the White People', and by mid-August at the latest, a detailed plan for the insurrection had been formulated.¹⁴⁸ Between thirty and a hundred rebels would assemble, and attempt in the first instance to board ships in the harbour to seize arms

¹⁴⁵ Minutes of the Council, 22 August 1797, CO23/36/109–10.

¹⁴⁶ Hunt to Portland, Nassau, 20 September 1797, CO23/36/117.

¹⁴⁷ 'Record of Conviction', CO23/36/120–21.

¹⁴⁸ 'Record of Conviction', CO23/36/120 (emphasis in original). Strikingly, the Saint-Domingue insurgents of 1791 also stressed their intention 'to take over the country' or of 'making themselves masters of the country': see Benot, 'Insurgents of 1791', 105–6.

and ammunition.¹⁴⁹ They would then break into the ordnance stores situated adjacent to the abandoned Fort Nassau in the centre of the town, despatching any sentries ‘in the most secret manner’, and at a stroke commandeering virtually all the munitions available in New Providence.¹⁵⁰ Reporting a year later on the state of the island’s defences, Captain Rutherford of the Royal Engineers noted with grave concern that ‘An Enemy... would find in that Store nine Hundred stand of Arms, with Guns, Entrenching Tools and other Stores.’¹⁵¹ Having taken what they needed and destroyed the remainder, including the artillery, the rebels would proceed against the fortifications built at great expense by Dunmore. Tucker and Bethune would direct the capture of Fort Fincastle, while Perpall led the attack on Fort Charlotte, to the west of Nassau, where the regular garrison were quartered.¹⁵²

Reports of what was to happen next are somewhat vague, but the plotters were said to have been in contact with armed runaways established in the interior of New Providence, who were expected to join the rebellion. Bethune and Lockhart had claimed that ‘there were near Three hundred ready to join when the Attack should be made’, meaning, presumably, once the forts and the magazine had been taken.¹⁵³ Hunt stated that the conspirators intended to ‘set fire to the East End of the Town, in order to divert the attentions of the inhabitants’, and would claim several months later that their ‘horrid design’ encompassed ‘this Island, and consequently the whole Colony, in all the calamities attendant on Insurrection and Anarchy.’¹⁵⁴ However, there is nothing to indicate that after burning Nassau the French conspirators intended ‘sailing off in a captured ship.’¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁹ The size of the initial group expected is reported variously as 70–80 [Minutes of the Council, 22 August 1797, CO23/36/109], 30 [Yengee’s Testimony, ‘Record of Conviction’, CO23/36/121], and 100 [Jack’s Testimony, ‘Record of Conviction’, CO23/36/121].

¹⁵⁰ Hunt to Portland, Nassau, 8 September 1797, CO23/36/104.

¹⁵¹ ‘Report on the General Defence of New Providence, Bahama Islands’, July 1798, WO55/1550/10/323.

¹⁵² Minutes of the Council, 22 August 1797, CO23/36/109; ‘Record of Conviction’, CO23/36/121. On Forts Charlotte and Fincastle, the chief fruits of Dunmore’s fortification programme, see Saunders & Cartwright, *Historic Nassau*, 27–8.

¹⁵³ Jack’s Testimony, ‘Record of Conviction’, CO23/36/121.

¹⁵⁴ Hunt to Portland, Nassau, 8 September 1797, CO23/36/104–5; Hunt’s Speech to the General Assembly, Nassau, 8 November 1797, CO23/37/6–7.

¹⁵⁵ This claim, in Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:211, may be derived from the accounts of escapes by foreign prisoners, or the 1795 conspiracy.

The reality, or lack of it, that lay behind slave conspiracy scares is notoriously elusive, and this one is no exception. The court record, consisting as it does of ‘revised versions of the words witnesses uttered, filtered through ears and pens belonging to one or more unknown clerks’, is deeply problematic.¹⁵⁶ In many respects, the evidence is meagre, and full of conspicuous gaps and silences. There is no record of any investigation in the interval between the arrests and the trial. Indeed, the eight people arrested are never explicitly identified; in light of where they were captured, it is likely that two of them were Baptiste Perpall and his wife. At least two other unnamed men were evidently never brought before the court, unless they testified for the prosecution. Nothing at all is known for sure about the initial informant, who approached Montell on the promise of anonymity. Beyond bland assurances from their owners as to their honesty, the motives of the trial witnesses can only be matter for speculation.

The background of the conspirators themselves is also frustratingly obscure. They are routinely described as ‘French Negroes’, and the *Bahama Gazette* claimed that the executed men ‘had all been Brigands in St. Domingo’.¹⁵⁷ The suspiciously anglophone names of Tom Bethune and Tom Lockhart may well have helped save them from the gallows. According to Peter Edwards, the ‘artful fellow’ who had masterminded the plot, presumably Perpall, had been ‘accused of the same crime two years ago’, when he had avoided being transported by testifying. Since then, he had changed owners several times, moved from New Providence to Cat Island and back again, and had been ‘practising as a Negro Doctor for some time’; newspaper reports claimed that one of the executed men had professed ‘Skill in Necromancy and Witchcraft’.¹⁵⁸

Nonetheless, the story of the conspiracy presented in the trial testimony is at least coherent and generally consistent. The plan was convincingly detailed as to the rising’s opening moves, without going into elaborate and speculative detail about what was to happen later. Moreover, in light of the ‘weak and enfeebled state’ of the

¹⁵⁶ Michael P. Johnson, ‘Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 58:4 (October 2001), 921; on this subject see also Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 402–12; Mullin, *Africa in America*, 215–40; James Sidbury, ‘Plausible Stories and Varnished Truths’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 59:1 (January 2002), 179–84; Philip D. Morgan, ‘Conspiracy Scares’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 59:1 (January 2002), 159–66.

¹⁵⁷ *Bahama Gazette*, 15 September 1797.

¹⁵⁸ Edwards to Chalmers, Nassau, 1 September 1797, Chalmers Papers, JCBL, reel 2; *Bahama Gazette*, 15 September 1797.

garrison, that plan was audacious, but certainly not unfeasible, assuming that a reasonable number of armed, determined and competent fighters could be assembled.¹⁵⁹ *If* a group of slaves in the Bahamas, possibly with some military experience from Saint-Domingue, really had resolved to ‘fight and take the country’, this might well be the sort of plan they would have come up with, and they would never get a better opportunity to carry it out.

The account we have of the conspiracy of 1797 could be the truth, or something close to it. Equally, it might be a plausible fiction, concocted or heavily embroidered by the informers, with or without the direct connivance of senior figures in the colonial government. There is no hard evidence to support the latter notion that the real conspiracy was directed against the supposed rebels, but none of these scenarios can be entirely discounted.

What can be said with some confidence is that the story *was* plausible, and that no one appears to have disputed its veracity. That plausibility owed a great deal to the continuously escalating and radicalising trajectory of revolution in the Atlantic since 1791. But revolution was far more than merely a context; its manifestations in the Bahamas were tangible and material. Fears of invasion, the arrival of ‘French Negroes’ and prisoners of war, and the attacks of privateers interacted with more local conflicts and dynamics in complicated and unpredictable ways, fuelling an uneven but relentless growth of anxiety and tension. By 1797, the effects of local and broader factors were so thoroughly intertwined that it seems futile to try to disentangle them. The military weakness of the colonial regime at this particular point in space and time made insurrection an unusually threatening or alluring possibility, but that weakness owed a great deal to the British army’s failure in Saint-Domingue, and the transmission to the Bahamas of the disease that was itself a major cause of that failure. Everyone was certain that the conspiracy stemmed from the ‘wicked intentions’ of the ‘French Negroes’; but what made such people dangerous was their integration within the wider non-white community, and the opportunities that that milieu apparently afforded for the clandestine circulation of ‘seditious discourses’ and ‘atrocious designs’.

¹⁵⁹ Minutes of the Council, 22 August 1797, CO23/36/110; Captain Rutherford certainly believed that the ordnance store was ‘not even safe from an Insurrection of the Negroes’: see WO55/1550/10/323. A strong correlation between garrison strengths and the incidence of slave rebellion in the British Caribbean is identified in David Patrick Geggus, ‘The Enigma of Jamaica in the 1790s: New light on the causes of slave rebellions’, *WMQ* 3rd ser., 44:2 (April 1987), 274–99.

In such an atmosphere, the idea that black Bahamians might try to ‘fight and take the country from the white people’ had a compelling, urgent, and lethal credibility that had seemingly been lacking even in 1795. The ensuing ‘spectacle of the scaffold’ was simultaneously ‘a stage on which to present the might of the state’, and a ‘theater of white power’ intended for the benefit of both blacks and whites. On the one hand, as Peter Edwards blandly put it, it was to be ‘hope[d] the Example will have a good Effect – the Negroes are getting to a terrible degree of insolence’. But for the white community public executions were also a cathartic and affirmatory performance of their own unity and cohesion.¹⁶⁰

Despite Governor Hunt’s insistence that ‘that the conspiracy was confined solely to the French Negroes’, witnesses repeatedly stressed that the plotters had intended ‘that the French and English Negroes were to be intermixed at the two Forts’.¹⁶¹ Moreover, the details presented at the trial incriminated virtually all of the ‘enclaves of independence’ that non-white Bahamians had maintained and developed in the interstices of the slave regime since 1783. In Nassau in particular, both slaves and free people of colour had sufficient money, freedom of movement, and free time to participate in a vibrant and extensive social culture that was largely beyond white scrutiny. The conspirators, all slaves, had the wherewithal and personal autonomy to rent rooms and houses, and to repeatedly entertain ‘a great number of... Negroes’ at ‘Feasts’ where potential recruits were plied with drink. Notably, Perpall, who had supposedly been in the Bahamas only a few years, lived with his wife in his own home. That his house was rented from a free man of colour, Stephen Rogers, who was himself a ‘fiddler’,¹⁶² surely served to confirm white suspicions about the subversive nature of the intercourse between the free and unfree sections of the non-white community. And, to cap it all, the maroons in the interior of New Providence were directly implicated in the plot.

Now the political initiative passed almost automatically into the hands of the people who had insisted since 1783 that the level of autonomy enjoyed by black

¹⁶⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 32; James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, rebellion and identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730–1810* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 126, 120; Edwards to Chalmers, Nassau, 10 September 1797, Chalmers Papers, JCBL, reel 2; see also Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 402–12; da Costa, *Crowns of Glory*, 242–5.

¹⁶¹ Hunt to Portland, Nassau, 20 September 1797, CO23/36/117; Jack’s Testimony, ‘Record of Conviction’, CO23/36/121. Cf. Yengee’s Testimony, ‘Record of Conviction’, CO23/36/121.

¹⁶² Yengee’s Testimony, ‘Record of Conviction’, CO23/36/121; Minutes of the Council, 22 August 1797, CO23/36/110. On Stephen Rogers see also Johnson, *Race Relations*, 71

people in the Bahamas was both wrong and dangerous. In the face of ‘the dread of our country becoming the theatre of such horrors as have been witnessed in St Domingo’, there was suddenly no room for ambivalence or dissent among white Bahamians. Peter Linebaugh observes that public executions were ‘one of the few occasions (coronations were another) that united the several parts of government’: the executive’s military and police apparatus carried out the mandate of the judiciary, which in turn interpreted and applied the statutory code laid down by the legislature. This may have been the largest group hanging in the Bahamas since 1718, when the deaths of eight pirates had symbolised Woodes Rogers’s reassertion of royal authority.¹⁶³ Likewise, the ‘getting rid’¹⁶⁴ of Perpall, Tucker, and Edgcombe served to herald the long-delayed ascendancy of the ‘Gentlemen of Character & Property’.

¹⁶³ Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and civil society in the eighteenth century* (London: Verso, 2006 edn.), xxii; on Woodes Rogers see pp. 90–91 above.

¹⁶⁴ Edwards to Chalmers, Nassau, 1 September 1797, Chalmers Papers, JCBL, reel 2.

Conclusion

I: Leaving the Eighteenth Century

By the end of the eighteenth century, with Dunmore and Baptiste Perpall safely departed, one to retirement in Ramsgate, the other to the scaffold, the challenges they had respectively represented to the Bahamian slave regime appeared to have been successfully contained. During the 1790s, the local and Atlantic political context had been transformed by the French and Haitian revolutions, severely curtailing the potential for efforts to interfere with slavery to emerge from the British political establishment. Just as Wilberforce had deemed it impolitic to submit a slave trade abolition bill to parliament in 1794,¹ Dunmore might well have opted to quietly withdraw his support for Bahamian state manumission, even had the process not been effectively curbed by his reluctant cession of financial control to the Assembly. He certainly considered the French to be a real and immediate threat, and the measures to enhance internal security after 1795 mostly met with his approval.

Nevertheless, while he remained governor, Dunmore's entrenched and bitter antipathy formed a permanent obstacle to the plantocratic aspirations of the Loyalist slaveholders. From their perspective, he had consistently declined to enforce appropriate standards of racial and class discipline, and shown a disturbing inclination to use the executive power *against* the self-styled men of 'respectable property'.² Moreover, Dunmore acted as a focal point for wider resistance to the Loyalist project. The 'lower Order of Whites' had always been suspicious of the émigrés' grand designs for transforming the Bahamas. Even after Dunmore's recall, the strength of their opposition to the 'reconstituted oligarchy' of planting and mercantile interests 'threatened to impede materially' Bahamian 'progress to Commercial Importance' and 'respectability'.³

But however contentious the issues at stake between conchs and Loyalists, their significance paled in the face of the 'most hellish plot' of 1797. In its aftermath, new Governor William Dowdeswell, who was well-informed about the years of

¹ Blackburn, *Overthrow*, 150.

² Wylly, *Short Account*, 17.

³ Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 20 February 1797, CO23/35/160; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:199; Forbes to Portland, Nassau, 13 November 1796, CO23/35/34.

conflict, observed that although some bitter personal antagonisms lingered, ‘all appearance of Party has subsided’.⁴ Precisely because Perpoll’s conspiracy appeared to connect the irruption of the ongoing revolutionary crisis of Atlantic slavery with the whole pattern of Bahamian race-relations since 1783, it made a seemingly unanswerable case for the further augmentation and refinement of the enhanced apparatus of repressive state power installed in the wake of 1795’s ‘unpleasant alarm’.

In November 1797, after a vote of thanks to the militia and regular garrison for their ‘Alertness and Zeal in suppressing the late attempts of the French Negroes in their intended Insurrection’, the Assembly appropriated £2,000 for the construction of a new ‘common-gaol, work-house, and house of correction’.⁵ Over the following years, a steady stream of legislation added to the machinery of social control. In 1798 the Police Act was re-enacted, along with a new law constituting a ‘Nassau Night Guard’, who were empowered to enter any ‘negro houses, negro yards, or other places where... meetings or assemblies shall be held on any pretence whatsoever, whether civil or religious, and immediately to seize and apprehend all... slaves, and other disorderly persons’. The Vagrancy Act of 1799 was not explicitly racialised in its targeting of ‘rogues, vagabonds, beggars and other idle and disorderly persons’. But Grand Juries had complained for many years of ‘Slaves and other People of Colour’ engaging in activities the Act marked out for particular condemnation, such as ‘playing or betting at unlawful games or plays’, unlicensed pedlars, and ‘persons not in holy orders but going about as preachers of the Gospel’. Any member of the public was now authorised to arrest such individuals, who might then be subjected to up to six months’ hard labour.⁶

As we have seen, the process of state manumission had already been sharply curtailed in the 1790s, and in 1799 slaveholders finally succeeded in abolishing Dunmore’s ‘negro court’. Although William Wylly would assert that ‘the laws of these islands provide an effectual remedy by which any man of colour, who has claim to freedom, may assert his right to it, with but little delay, and without either expense or personal procedure’, the 1799 Act confronted such claimants with a markedly more

⁴ Dowdeswell to Chalmers, Nassau, 1 May 1798 (‘private’), Force Papers, LC, Series 8A #11, ff. 1–2.

⁵ Minutes of the House of Assembly, 10 November 1797, CO23/37/69; statute of 38 Geo. III, c. 2, *Acts of Assembly* (1806), 1:123.

⁶ Police Act, 39 Geo. III; Night Watch Act, 39 Geo. III; Vagrancy Act, 40 Geo. III, all in *Acts of Assembly* (1801), 1:87–105, 73–6, 157–61.

formal, elaborate and longwinded procedure. They were required first of all to state their case to ‘some Council or Attorney’ who would then report in writing to the General Court ‘whether the claim appears to him to be valid and well founded’. If the Court approved this report, it would then appoint a ‘guardian’ to prepare a suit on the claimant’s behalf. Moreover, the Act directed that anyone ‘claiming his, or her freedom... shall forthwith be committed to the common gaol, workhouse or other place of safe custody, there to remain so long as the suit shall be pending’. Unsurprisingly, by 1812 there had been just seventeen such suits.⁷

A parallel series of measures were designed to consolidate the new political order, in part by clarifying and hardening the notoriously hazy Bahamian colour line. An Act of 1799 explicitly confined voting rights to white males who were either freeholders or had paid £50 worth of duties to the colonial treasury in a given year. Membership of the Assembly was restricted to ‘Gentlemen of Character & Property’ amounting to 200 acres of land or a value of £2,000. In the same year, four new seats in the legislature were created, representing the Caicoses, Turks, Crooked and Watling Islands, all newly-settled since the mid-1780s, overwhelmingly by Loyalist planters and their slaves.⁸ The law of 1756 rendering Bahamians with relatively distant African ancestry legally white was suspended for fifty years in 1802. Henceforth, a North American legal standard of race would apply in the Bahamas; as William Wyly bluntly put it, ‘one drop of black blood’ was now sufficient to disqualify an individual from white status.⁹ The principal aim of ‘An Act to suspend an Act, entitled, “An Act to ascertain who shall not be deemed Mulattoes’ was surely to curb the political influence of the phenotypically ambiguous ‘Lower Class’ of indigenous Bahamians, the kind of people described to this day as ‘Long Island whites’.¹⁰ Disenfranchisement

⁷ ‘An Act for altering the mode of trying questions relative to the freedom of Negroes, and other persons of colour’, 1799, 40 Geo. III, *Acts of Assembly* (1801), 221–4; Wyly to Macaulay, 15 April 1812, in Chalmers, *Proofs and Demonstrations*, 52.

⁸ ‘Qualifications of Electors Act’, 1799, 40 Geo. III c. 1; statute of 40 Geo. III. c. 7, both in *Acts of Assembly* (1806), 1:174–86, 229.

⁹ ‘An Act to Suspend an Act, entitled, “An Act to ascertain who shall not be deemed Mulattoes’, 1802, 42 Geo. III c. 13, *Acts of Assembly* (1806), 1:291; Amended Draft of Wyly’s Answers to Committee of House of Assembly, 1816, quoted in McWeeney, ‘Madding Crowd’, 21. On the evolution of the North American ‘one-drop’ rule see Jordan, *White Over Black*, 167–78.

¹⁰ Dunmore’s successor as governor, John Forbes, referred repeatedly to the ‘lower class’ or ‘order’ of Bahamians; see for instance CO23/35/23, 95, 160–61. On the term ‘Long Island white’ see Gail Saunders, *Bahamian Society after Emancipation* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2003 edn.), 216.

of those with ‘a dash of dark blood in their veins’¹¹ would leave a more manageable residuum of the most racially reliable elements, who might be co-opted by the regime.

At the same time, work commenced on the suite of new public buildings at the east end of Bay Street that would eventually house the Assembly, General Court and all the major offices of colonial government. These impressive structures would offer a physical counterpart to the establishment of an enlarged, more coercive state apparatus, in the service of a more rigid and hierarchical socio-political order. As an unmistakable visual manifestation of the break with the past, they were a fitting seat of power for the new oligarchy.¹²

On the face of it, then, everything that Loyalist slaveholders had called for since their arrival in the Bahamas had been achieved. In the teeth of dogged resistance, the legal and political framework for sustaining a plantocracy had finally been put into place. What remained less clear was how far this formal hegemony would translate into the power to shape the everyday realities of Bahamian life.

During the 1780s, Loyalists had proudly boasted of how their ‘uncommon exertions in Planting and Commerce’ had ‘in the term of no more than three years rescued the Bahamas from insignificance’.¹³ Through the *deus ex machina* of cotton, the émigrés would enrich themselves, and simultaneously transform the Bahamas. But by turn of the century, such claims were looking increasingly hollow. To many people, in the face of erratic and steadily declining crop yields, falling profits and mounting debts, it seemed that ‘as a planting Colony, *our all is at stake*’ on what had turned out to be ‘the desperate game’ of ‘the deceitful speculation of planting cotton’.¹⁴

In the absence of any credible alternative crop, if cotton failed, there would be no plantocracy after all. Strangely, it remains the case that ‘no in-depth study of cotton cultivation in the Bahamas exists’,¹⁵ but this has not prevented cotton’s decline from

¹¹ The words of Dr. P. S. Townsend of New York, who visited the Bahamas in the 1820s; see *Nassau, Bahamas 1823–4* (Nassau: Bahamas Historical Society, 1968), 25.

¹² Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:216; Craton, ‘Hopetown and Hard Bargain’, 257–9; Saunders & Cartwright, *Historic Nassau*, 18–20.

¹³ ‘Memorial of the Planters and other Inhabitants of the Island of Abaco’, 6 January 1788, CO23/27/119.

¹⁴ *Bahama Gazette*, 19 April 1799 (emphasis in original); *Communications on Different Subjects*, 6; McKinnen, *Tour*, 176.

¹⁵ Saunders, ‘Slave Life, Slave Society and Cotton Production’, 332.

taking on great significance in Bahamian historiography. For Craton and Saunders, it serves as one of those ‘common environmental and ecological factors’ that ultimately proved decisive in ensuring that ‘the Loyalists were as much changed by the Bahamas as vice versa’. For Howard Johnson, ‘the collapse of cotton production’ was the ‘catalyst’ for ‘the restructuring of the relationship between slaves and their owners, along lines commonly associated with the post-slavery years’.¹⁶

The trajectory of the Bahamian cotton economy is a more complicated issue than is often realised, and one that cannot be fully addressed here. But it is important to note that there is room for doubt as to whether cotton will satisfactorily bear the load of interpretive significance that has been heaped upon it. The much-rehearsed formula of a ‘crisis in production’, caused by natural disasters, insect pests, and above all, the erosion and exhaustion of thin Bahamian soils depends heavily on an uncritical and sometimes selective use of narrative sources produced by the planters and their sympathisers for specific purposes.¹⁷ The quantitative evidence, often carelessly handled, has never been fully collated.¹⁸ Of course, exaggerated claims of land’s declining fertility were a time-honoured staple of the ‘groans of the plantations’ throughout the Atlantic.¹⁹ Bahamian planters testified at length from 1799 onwards concerning ‘the exhausted state of our soil’, at least when new grants of crown land were in the offing. But somehow they managed never to provide quite enough specific information to calculate actual yields, for which there seem to be no hard numbers later than 1788.²⁰ Indeed, patchy as it is, the quantitative evidence suggests that cotton production in the Bahamas peaked no earlier than the later 1790s, with a level of

¹⁶ Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:xx, 196–9; Johnson, ‘Slow & Extended Abolition’, 165.

¹⁷ Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 26. Daniel McKinnen’s bleak account of abandoned plantations and ‘amiable and industrious planters... sinking into ruin’ has been widely drawn on: see for instance Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 12, 28, 30; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:213–4; Craton, *History of the Bahamas*, 180–1. But McKinnen also described, in less emotive terms, the extensive ongoing cotton cultivation on Caicos and Acklin’s Islands: see *Tour*, 155, 192–5, 131–2, 179–84.

¹⁸ See for instance the claims about Bahamian cotton exports from 1794–1805, based on figures for exports only to North America, in Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 26–8.

¹⁹ See for instance Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery*, 140–41; Blackburn, *Making*, 420; William J. Cooper, jr., ‘The Cotton Crisis in the Antebellum South: Another look’, *Agricultural History*, 49:2 (April 1975), 381–92.

²⁰ ‘Answers of the Honorable John Kelsall Esq.’ to ‘Queries on the Culture of Cotton’, enclosure in Dowdeswell to Portland, 22 May 1800, CO23/39/169; see also ‘The Memorial of Sundry of the Planters of Crooked Island’, 14 March 1798, Force Papers, LC, Series 8A #11, ff. 1–6.

output as late as 1814 that remained well above what was achieved during the supposed boom years of the 1780s.²¹

Thus, insofar as the planters' outpourings of fin-de-siècle angst reflected a real crisis in the cotton economy, it seems more constructive to view it as much in terms of a crisis of *profitability* as one of production. That is to say, planters began to stop planting cotton when they no longer expected to make money from doing so. There is, to be sure, very little concrete evidence for profitability, about which almost nothing can currently be said with any confidence. But approaching the issue in this way raises the possible significance of other factors – such as the financial and material impact of war during the 1790s, the vicissitudes of international cotton prices, and the concessions made to enslaved workers in the relations of production that were hastily improvised in the 1780s.

This is not to suggest that soil exhaustion and other problems of production were not important, perhaps even critically so. But, in the absence of a systematic evaluation of their significance relative to other issues, the causal priority that historians have so readily assigned to environmental factors remains ultimately speculative.

Likewise, the argument that the 'disintegration of the short-lived plantation economy' led to 'a process of restructuring of the relations between slaves and their owners... that prefigured the labor arrangements of the postemancipation years' is a tentative hypothesis at best.²² The trouble is that the phenomena cited as the results of this restructuring – the hire and self-hire systems in Nassau, enslaved participation in the market economy, the protopeasant activity facilitated by the task system and

²¹ 570 and 674 tons of cotton were exported in 1809–10 according to Bryan Edwards; a figure of 353 tons in 1814 appears in a parliamentary report. See Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial*, 5th edn., (5 vols., London, 1819), 5: (Appendix) 38; 'Accounts Relating to the Bahama Islands, 1812–1814', House of Commons Sessional Papers, 1816 (392), p. 3; xiv.453. In 1796, John Wells anticipated a cotton crop 'double of what was ever raised in any preceding year in these Islands, that is, it will considerably exceed fifteen hundred tons': Wells to Chalmers, 1 January 1796, CO23/34/327 (my emphasis). 'A Cotton Planter' reckoned 'a Full Crop at twelve Hundred tons' in *Bahama Gazette*, 19 April 1799.

Eighteenth-century Bahamians reckoned in the short ton of 2,000 lbs (with a hundredweight of 100 lbs), and the quantities above, given in pounds in the sources, have been rendered accordingly. Those from Bryan Edwards appear, converted into long tons of 2,240 lbs (the later British and Bahamian 'imperial' standard), alongside other contemporary production statistics given in what are actually short tons, in Saunders, *Slavery in the Bahamas*, 23, 27. See *Bahama Gazette*, 11 April 1789, where the cotton crop planted in 1787 (and picked in 1788) is variously referred to as being 438,289 lbs and 219 tons.

²² Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, xiii–xiv.

provision grounds – were all already well-established in the 1780s.²³ Nor has any concrete evidence been presented that they were *more* prevalent after the ‘disintegration’ of the cotton economy,²⁴ the timing of which is left conveniently vague. Johnson alone has variously written of ‘the collapse of cotton production in the Bahamas *by* 1800’, or that ‘production virtually ceased *after* 1800’, or that ‘*by* 1815 the Loyalist dream of establishing a plantation economy in the Bahamas had faded’.²⁵ Thus, insofar as ‘these developments constituted a slow and extended abolition’ or ‘the decline of formal slavery’,²⁶ it is equally plausible to trace that process back to the 1780s.

What Johnson’s work does clearly show is the extent to which the new regime proved unable to do more than contain the forms of economic and social independence that non-white Bahamians had managed to establish during the previous decades. The Grand Jury complained in 1799 of ‘Negroes ... monopolizing all Fruits Roots and Vegetables’ for sale in Nassau, while self-hiring slaves were ‘extorting unreasonable Wages, and keeping the greatest Part of the same to themselves’. Such activities continued to afford their protagonists ‘the Means of indulging in every kind of Dissipation’, with the ‘negro dances’ developing into elaborate and expensive ‘subscription balls’ for which written invitations were distributed. At Christmas, the streets of Nassau were filled with the sound of ‘bad music on hoarse cracked drums & fifes’ into the small hours.²⁷

The supposed involvement of runaway slaves based in the interior of New Providence in the 1797 conspiracy had given fresh impetus for action against this longstanding thorn in the side of the regime. A proclamation offering a \$50 reward for

²³ There is no evidence that the other ‘transitional forms of labour management between slavery and capitalist relations of production’ that Johnson identifies, labour tenancy and sharecropping, were applied to slaves as well as liberated African apprentices. See ‘Slow and Extended Abolition’, 168–9.

²⁴ It should be stressed that the simple fact of the nineteenth-century turn towards to food crops and stock raising on Bahamian plantations does not of itself indicate a shift to proto-peasant relations, except where, as in the case of John Rolle, owners effectively abdicated any control over the organisation of production. The Rolle estates on Exuma were exceptional in many respects, and the claim that ‘the practice on the Rolle plantations became widespread on estates in other Bahamian islands’ is only supported by reference to the treatment of liberated Africans rather than slaves. See Johnson, ‘Slow & Extended Abolition’, 167; Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, 204–7, 227–31.

²⁵ Johnson, ‘Slow & Extended Abolition’, 165–6; Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, xiv, 32 (my emphases).

²⁶ Johnson, ‘Slow & Extended Abolition’, 165; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:213–32.

²⁷ Grand Jury quoted in Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 36; Johnson, ‘Slave Life and Leisure’, 52–3; *Nassau, Bahamas*, 20.

the apprehension of such fugitives, as well as an amnesty for those who voluntarily surrendered within three months, was issued even before the trial of the conspirators. A notice published at the same time calling for owners of runaways to submit ‘a List of their Names and particular Descriptions’ to the Police Office implied a plan for more systematic measures, but there is no evidence of their being carried into effect.²⁸ By 1801, according to the London *Times*, runaways on New Providence had ‘become exceedingly formidable to their masters’ under the leadership of ‘a Chief who was known by the name of *King Caesar*’, and who ‘had been a Prince in Africa’. Caesar’s death, ‘celebrated as an occasion of general joy’, may have occurred during one of the several operations against runaways conducted by the coloured militia companies in the early 1800s. Nonetheless, maroons remained established on the island into the 1820s, when a group of them exchanged fire with soldiers of the Second West India Regiment.²⁹

The preamble to a law of 1800 addressing the runaway problem rehearsed the longstanding complaint that ‘the protection afforded them by the free people of colour, greatly tends to encourage desertion’. These two groups shared the distinction of being the most overt manifestations of non-white autonomy, and the ‘Act for the more effectually to prevent the desertion of Slaves’ seemingly sought to compensate for the regime’s inability to eradicate the one by punishing the other. It required free non-whites not only to register their names, ages and addresses at the police office, but also to ‘provide themselves with a silver medal of the size of a dollar’, inscribed with their name, a registration number issued by a magistrate, and the word ‘FREE’. This device was to ‘be worn at all times... exposed to public view’, on pain of arrest.³⁰

As well as such indignities, free non-white Bahamians were also subjected to much of the new regimen of racial control and repression directed principally at the enslaved. Nonetheless, during the nineteenth century, they would be both relatively prosperous, and increasingly numerous. According to Wylly, writing in 1812, free coloured ‘heads of families are in general freeholders; some of them opulent planters’. As early as 1803, Governor John Halkett was worrying that ‘in New Providence too

²⁸ Minutes of the Council, 28 August 1797, CO23/36/113; *Bahama Gazette*, 5 September 1797.

²⁹ *The Times*, 19 August 1801 (emphasis in original); Johnson, *Race Relations*, 45–6, 73–4; Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:369–71.

³⁰ ‘An Act for the more effectually preventing the desertion of Slaves’, 1800, 41 Geo. III, c. 2, *Acts of Assembly* (1806), 1:237–9.

many of our blacks have obtained their freedom'.³¹ In 1788, there were supposedly 6 whites for every free person of colour. Two decades later, despite the efforts to close down one legal route out of slavery, there were less than 2.5, and by 1834 the ratio was almost even, with the free non-white population having increased more than eightfold since the 1780s.³²

For Bahamian slaveholders, free people of colour were generally characterised by 'an invincible aversion to all regular labour, ... idleness and profligacy, sometimes combined with fanaticism'. From the perspective of the colonial American South, the transition to plantocracy entailed the marginalisation, and preferably the disappearance, of this 'species of population of little use'; in Ira Berlin's words, 'the growth of a slave society and the degradation of free people of African descent were part of the same process of making slavery and making race.'³³ Conversely, for Loyalists, the thriving state of the free non-white community was a constant reminder of how far their grand designs for the Bahamas had gone awry.

Moreover, recent history offered clear evidence of the perils entailed by the co-existence of slavery with people who were neither white nor enslaved. The Assembly warned in 1817 that 'the fate of Saint Domingo, and the present distracted state of the Spanish continental colonies... afford a dreadful and impressive lesson of the danger of a large free coloured population in slave colonies.'³⁴

The Bahamian ruling class would continue to invoke the example of the Haitian Revolution, sometimes alluding to the direct threat it had supposedly posed to themselves, in reaction to virtually any challenge to slaveholding interests. When black troops from the Fifth and Sixth West India Regiments arrived in Nassau in 1801, Robert Hunt, again acting as temporary governor, assured London that 'the agitation of the public mind could not have been greater had Toussaint himself come with all his force.'³⁵ Arguing in 1815 against metropolitan proposals to make slaves'

³¹ Wylly to Macaulay, 15 April 1812, in Chalmers, *Proofs and Demonstrations*, 52; Halkett quoted in McWeeney, 'Madding Crowd', 24.

³² 1788: 3040 whites, 500 'free people of colour': CO23/30/336; 1807: 3,525 whites, 1,485 'Free Coloreds and Blacks': Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:180, table 3; 1834: 4,667 whites, 4,211 'Free Blacks': 'Bahamas. Population, Births, Marriages, and Deaths, in 1834', House of Commons Sessional Papers, 1837 (100), p. 56; xlix.481.

³³ House of Assembly's message to the Governor, 2 January 1817, quoted in McWeeney, 'Madding Crowd', 25; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 126.

³⁴ Quoted in McWeeney, 'Madding Crowd', 25.

³⁵ Hunt quoted in Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:218.

testimony admissible as evidence against whites, a committee of the Assembly noted that 'evil-disposed negroes' who existed 'in all our Colonies' had already used their 'extraordinary talents for intrigue' to 'spread carnage and conflagration through one of the most flourishing Colonies in the West Indies: Nor, perhaps, is there a single Colony, in which alarming conspiracies, with similar views and a like fatal tendency, have not been at some time or other detected.'³⁶

By the nineteenth century, then, the Bahamas were presided over by a ruling class at once firmly entrenched and everywhere confronted by the limits of its own power. Haunted by both the failed dream of a Bahamian cotton kingdom and the lingering nightmare of descent into the Haitian 'abyss of anarchy', the elite retreated into an uncompromising commitment to 'the only system which... can possibly keep the knife from the throats, and the faggot from the roofs, of all the white inhabitants of the West Indies.'³⁷ Members of the elite who deviated to any extent from the mores and mindset of a slave society, as William Wylly would do after converting to Methodism, were subjected to relentless and sometimes violent persecution.³⁸ Although professing their disinterestedness 'in the Sugar question', Bahamian slaveholders unequivocally echoed the 'recalcitrance and siege mentality' of their Caribbean 'brother planters' in their dogged resistance to metropolitan initiatives for the regulation and amelioration of slavery.³⁹ Their increasingly strident denunciations of abolitionism warned that the 'inflammatory Appeal' of 'the humane Mr. Wilberforce and his tender-hearted associates' was 'but too well calculated to... produce the same tragical effects, which similar publications and similar measures in France, produced in St. Domingo'. In such a case, there could be no doubt that the 'London philanthropists would gladly dance, in spirit at least, round the smoking ruins of every thing valuable in the West Indies, until a sufficiency of blood were spilt to quash the conflagration.'⁴⁰

³⁶ Journals of the House of Assembly, 15 November 1815, in Chalmers, *Proofs and Demonstrations*, 14–15.

³⁷ *Official Letter*, 23, 69.

³⁸ See Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:221–4; Riley, *Homeward Bound*, 203–6; Wilkie & Farnsworth, *Sampling Many Pots*, 69–75. On West Indian anti-Methodism and its relation to colonial resistance to antislavery see David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity during the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 140–73.

³⁹ *Official Letter*, 64; Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, 192–5 (quotation at 194); Craton & Saunders, *Islanders*, 1:227–8.

⁴⁰ *Official Letter*, 64, 70–71.

Although exercising ‘wonderful ingenuity’ in adapting their regime to post-slavery conditions, the Bahamian oligarchy would maintain their ‘Bourbonese colonial conservatism’ for over a century. In the process, they earned a reputation as ‘perhaps the most narrow-minded ruling class in the entire English-speaking Caribbean’, and made the colony infamous for ‘excessive racial discrimination’. In the meantime, the black majority were consigned to ‘a grim struggle for existence’ by continuing economic stagnation and a ‘machinery of class slavery’ that remained ‘untouched in its essentials until the 1960s’.⁴¹

⁴¹ Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, 396; Lewis, *Modern West Indies*, 324, 328, 339. See also Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 84–118.

II: The Bahamas and the Revolutionary Atlantic

This was not the outcome that anyone had really wanted, nor one that could be confidently predicted from any static assessment of the state of the Bahamas in 1783. It was the result of a convoluted, erratic and often fortuitous trajectory, initiated by the disruption of slavery during the American Revolutionary War that had uprooted thousands of slaveholders and enslaved African Americans. The physical migration of these people is relatively easy to track, compared with their various social, legal and psychological routes beyond the bounds of the Southern slave regime. The direction and destination of those routes remained very much in the balance on reaching the Bahamas. There, the Loyalist migration imposed further strains on already rather ramshackle structures of state power and race and class discipline. Over the following years the resulting gaps and weak points in this edifice would offer black émigrés new opportunities to continue the pursuit of independence and control over their own lives that had dislodged them from the world of the mainland plantocracy. Simultaneously, the Bahamian slave regime's plentiful interstices facilitated the evasion and subversion of Loyalist slaveholders' efforts to plot a direct course back towards that world. Inasmuch as they were cast as willing or unwilling fellow travellers in such a journey, everyone in the Bahamas was unavoidably embroiled in what amounted to conflicts over their future way of life.

These struggles were further complicated by the arrival of Dunmore, who opened up a legal route to freedom that was not only a direct challenge to the Loyalist drive to re-enslavement, but also, it seemed to slaveholders like William Wylly, a threat to the legal foundations of slavery itself. The issue of state manumission thus precipitated a further round of political infighting that left white Bahamians more bitterly divided than ever.

In this situation, neither the nascent planter class nor the colonial state were well-equipped to meet the fresh challenges posed by the return of revolutionary crisis to the Atlantic world in the 1790s. French attacks, combined with wartime inflation and shortages, threatened to unravel the working of the precarious compromise that was the Out Island plantation economy. Meanwhile a new round of forced migration brought with it the prospect of a very different way out of enslavement for non-white Bahamians. It was only the nightmare of insurrection that 'agitated the Public mind'

sufficiently to render Bahamian politics the kind of racialised zero-sum game at which Loyalist slaveholders were the most accomplished and effective players.

This is manifestly not a trajectory that can be wholly or principally understood in terms of patterns of continuity immanent to the Bahamas. The wave of revolution that swept the Atlantic world from the 1770s onwards is a critical factor, but nor is this a sequence of events that are easily reduced to a straightforward account of the impact of an irresistible tide of upheaval from outside. At one level, this study has unavoidably involved an argument for the need to rethink the relative importance afforded to ‘external’ and ‘internal’ influences in Bahamian history. But it has also sought to show the arbitrariness of those categories, and to question the utility of the tacit assumption of their easily defined and readily apparent nature for a period when everything points to the fuzziness of the distinction. In the late eighteenth century, when John Wells would probably have found the notion of the Bahamas as an independent nation rather less plausible than ‘the Idea of a Sable Republic in St. Domingo’, the very question of precisely who counts as Bahamian is not easy to answer.

More importantly, in these years, ostensibly external and internal ‘factors’ regularly come bound together in complex and reciprocal patterns, within which their influence and significance largely reside; separating them out, where it is even possible, effaces what makes them matter. Hence, it is often impossible to clearly differentiate African-American émigrés from other black people in the Bahamas, especially in Nassau, the place from which there is by far the most evidence of their behaviour. Dunmore’s project of state manumission was the culmination of personal and imperial trajectories spanning the breadth of the Atlantic and beyond. In a more immediate sense it was clearly unfinished business from the American Revolution. But it also reflected from the limited options of the colonial state in addressing an increasingly unstable situation in the Bahamas. The conspiracy of 1797 was so alarming, as that of 1795 apparently was not, precisely because the spectre of Saint-Domingue was seemingly manifested within the framework of black life in Nassau. Indeed, if anything, the specificity, the uniqueness, of what happened in the Bahamas becomes all the more evident when viewed not as being distinct from, but rather as part of, the wider history of the revolutionary Atlantic.

Furthermore, the Bahamian case illustrates the limitations of any straightforward or linear model of the relationship between the Age of Revolution and

the contemporaneous challenges to slavery. Studies of revolution have often been informed to varying degrees by one or another theoretical schema, the seemingly self-evident teleologies of national histories, or the effort to come to terms with participants' own very real sense of being propelled by larger forces beyond their ken or control. Embedded somewhere in all such approaches is an account of revolution as the course of a tide of progress impeded to a greater or lesser degree by sandbanks of reaction and conservatism. And the impulse of the Age of Revolution, whether conceptualised as the rise of liberty or democracy, the triumph of capitalism and the bourgeoisie, or the making of modernity, has been routinely construed to be something ultimately and essentially inimical to slavery. Hence, Eric Hobsbawm believes that by 1848 'it was... inevitable that sooner or later legal slavery or serfdom... would have to go'; Bernard Bailyn describes how African slavery was forced upon the agenda of the American Revolution by a 'self-intensifying... movement of thought [that] was rapid, irreversible, and irresistible'; Eugene Genovese thinks that the 'developmental dead end' of Atlantic slavery 'inevitably conflicted with one or more elements of the emerging bourgeois ideology', whose decisive breakthrough came with 'the conquest of state power by the representatives of the consolidating bourgeoisie in France'.⁴² Interpretations of this kind have been, and remain, hugely influential. But they are problematic for several reasons.

Firstly, there was indeed a logical (and pretty obvious) contradiction between the existence of African slavery and revolutionary ideologies that were professedly about things like liberty and equality, although the significance of this fact for 'a social order which gloried in inconsistency'⁴³ can easily be over-stated. But there were also very real contradictions between the same revolutionary principles and antislavery, or at least any kind of antislavery strategy beyond the moral suasion of individual slaveholders. Hence George Washington could with all sincerity brand Dunmore 'that Arch Traitor to the Rights of Humanity'.⁴⁴ In formulating their statements of principles, revolutionaries often preferred to pretend that slavery and its victims did not exist, or at any rate to avoid mentioning them by name. Until quite

⁴² Hobsbawm, *Age of Revolution*, 303; Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 231–2; Genovese, *Rebellion to Revolution*, xviii–xix.

⁴³ Blackburn, *Overthrow*, 82.

⁴⁴ See p. 66 above.

recently, their modern admirers tended to follow suit, addressing slavery only as it was abolished, and for exactly as long as it took to give their heroes the credit for it.

What is clear is that the lines of battle drawn up between revolutionaries and conservatives did not correspond to those between opponents and defenders of slavery with anything approaching consistency. Dunmore, a man regarded as a reactionary even by his fellow counter-revolutionaries the Loyalists, is a very striking example of someone who subverted slavery in an effort to maintain the existing political order. Many other people arrived at antislavery positions via a comparably conservative, paternalistic politics, such as William Wilberforce and James Ramsay. Slavery's most consistent enemies were the enslaved themselves, and they also frequently turn up on what by rights should be the wrong side of revolution, fighting for their freedom in the name of kings both real and fictitious.⁴⁵ Conversely, the actions, or rather lack of them, of slaveholding American patriots like Washington and Jefferson speak louder than their sporadic and often private expressions of antislavery sentiments; nor is the track record of French revolutionaries much better before 1794. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot bluntly puts it, 'the Haitian Revolution was the ultimate test to the universalist pretensions of both the French and American revolutions. And they both failed.'⁴⁶

Of course, expediency was a factor in the actions of all these protagonists. When Dunmore freed slaves in Virginia, he thought it was to Britain's advantage to do so, and most abolitionists of the 1780s probably believed the same thing about their cause. It was manifestly in pursuit of their own interests that the authorities in Spanish Santo Domingo armed rebel slaves, and that Toussaint Louverture became a 'General of the Armies of the King'. But exactly the same can be said of Sonthonax in 1793, and of the Jacobin regime's sudden conversion to revolutionary emancipation in 1794, quite aside from the inconsistent and particularist way that these new-found principles were actually expressed in practice.

A second issue is that the outcomes and effects of revolution might just as easily expand or strengthen slavery as undermine it. As we have seen, the American Revolution precipitated Loyalist efforts to force the Bahamas more fully into the sphere of the Atlantic plantation complex, as well as tripling the size of the slave

⁴⁵ See pp. 63–4 above.

⁴⁶ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 88.

population. In the Bahamas, the most concrete lasting consequence of the revolutions of the 1790s was the political ascendancy of the slaveholders. More generally, American independence resulted in a constitutional settlement that allowed Southern slaveholders to dominate national politics and largely preclude federal interference with the ‘peculiar institution’ for over half a century.⁴⁷ In Britain, the French and Haitian Revolutions produced a mood of ‘chauvinist rictus’. As abolitionism stalled during the 1790s, prodigious amounts of blood and treasure were expended on the acquisition of yet more prime plantation real estate in the circum-Caribbean, whose development was fuelled by the arrival of over 300,000 African captives in British ships.⁴⁸ The collapse of Saint-Domingue left a huge gap in the world sugar market, spurring a dramatic expansion of plantation agriculture in hitherto marginal areas such as Cuba.⁴⁹ The ‘final test’ of the Haitian Revolution, the frustration of Bonaparte’s grand design for the restoration of slavery, opened the way to the development of another new ‘empire for slavery’ on the North American mainland.⁵⁰

Of course, American colonists did not take up arms in the 1770s to send enslaved African Americans to the Bahamas, any more than the people who would soon be called Haitians resisted Leclerc’s expedition with the intention of opening up a different cotton frontier in the Louisiana Territory. But to start discounting the significance of revolutionary outcomes on grounds of fortuitousness is to embark down a very slippery slope indeed.⁵¹ For one thing, those involved in ‘such periods of revolutionary crisis’ all too often opted to ‘conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes’. As Gordon Wood observes, the United States ‘was not the society the revolutionary leaders had wanted

⁴⁷ See Nash, *Forgotten Fifth*, 69–122; Donald L. Robinson, *Slavery in the Structure of American Politics, 1765–1820* (New York: Norton, 1979); Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An account of the United States government’s relations to slavery* (New York: OUP, 2002); Bruce Levine, *Half Slave and Half Free: The roots of civil war* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

⁴⁸ Blackburn, *Overthrow*, 131–60 (quotation at 156); David Richardson, ‘The British Empire and the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1660–1807’, in Marshall, ed., *British Empire*, 2:442, table 20.1; see also Geggus, ‘British Opinion and the Emergence of Haiti’, 123–49; Drescher, *Abolition*, 169–72.

⁴⁹ Davis, *Age of Revolution*, 53–5; Drescher, *Abolition*, 172–3, 183–5; Matt D. Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle Against Atlantic Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 21–45.

⁵⁰ James, *Black Jacobins*, 288; Dubois, *Avengers*, 251–305; Blackburn, *Overthrow*, 283–6; Robert L. Paquette, ‘Revolutionary Saint Domingue in the Making of Territorial Louisiana’, in Gaspar & Geggus, eds., *Turbulent Time*, 204–25; the expression ‘empire for slavery’ is from James M. McPherson, *Battle-Cry of Freedom: The Civil War era* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990 edn.), 51.

⁵¹ On this point see the discussion in Langley, *Americas in the Age of Revolution*, 9–10.

or expected'. 'Had they not all been royalists in 1789...?', Hannah Arendt's pithy comment on the extraordinary political trajectory of the French revolutionaries, could also be applied to 1791 and the insurgency in Saint-Domingue.⁵² The results of the Age of Revolution in North America, France, Haiti, and the Bahamas, were very often a long way from what any of the people responsible for them had intended or foreseen.

By this point, from the historian's perspective, it is reasonable to ask 'but is this revolution really such a desirable thing?'⁵³ Moreover, in the context of a more general 'incredulity toward metanarratives', it is easy to suspect the 'Age of Revolution' of being 'a gigantic effort to domesticate revolts within a rational and controllable history', an inevitably Eurocentric discourse that subsumes and occludes subaltern voices and actions.⁵⁴ In dealing with the history of enslavement and resistance, one way of addressing such concerns has been to focus instead upon questions of 'what the slaves really wanted and how they planned to achieve it', and more generally to assign eristic priority to local factors and internal dynamics. But the Bahamian case illustrates at least the possibility of telling a story about the Age of Revolution and slavery that avoids the sort of zero sum debate that 'counterposes those who see the Haitian Revolution and related instances of slave resistance as part of a western worldwide movement and ideology, and those prepared to grant a separate ideology of resistance to the slaves.'⁵⁵

The continuing influence, within and beyond the academy, of the idea of revolution as one or another kind of progress owes a great deal to certain consequences of the Age of Revolution whose continuing, and increasingly global influence has made their significance seem manifestly self-evident. One such consequence was the triumph of the nation state, which can reasonably be argued to have 'learned most, and ultimately benefited most, from the ideological turmoil of the years after 1780.' The revolutionary construction of new nations and re-casting of

⁵² Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Moscow, 1954 edn.), 10; Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 365; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 49.

⁵³ Foucault, 'Useless to Revolt?', 450.

⁵⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A report on knowledge*, tr. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv; Foucault, 'Useless to Revolt', 450; see also Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 74–83, 96–107; Garraway, "'Légitime Défense'", 63–9.

⁵⁵ Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, 419, 416.

existing polities in national terms in this period was a phenomenon ‘felt to be something absolutely unprecedented, yet at the same time, once in existence, absolutely reasonable.’ It gave rise to an increasingly normative “‘model” of “the” independent national state’ that has been hugely successful in exercising ‘the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming’. Edward Said observes that ‘nations themselves *are* narrations’. Moreover, they function within these narratives as both assertion and demonstration of their own status as the central touchstone of significance and meaning for what they claim as ‘their’ past.⁵⁶

As a result, it is hard to consider what happened in revolutionary North America, or France, or Saint-Domingue, without reference to ‘ultimate’ outcomes like the United States, or ‘*la grande nation*’, or Haiti, and the national metanarratives these names have been made to signify. But, largely because of their relative obscurity and assumed insignificance, the Bahamas offer a prism for viewing things in a rather different light. From the Bahamian perspective, we can see how the impact of all these revolutions was transmitted beyond the ostensible limits of such outcomes by multiple and intertwined circum-Atlantic networks – such as those of war, empire, and capital – that propelled the movement of people, commodities, ideas and experience. Moreover, these volatile and diverse trajectories intersected and fed back on one another, as in the Bahamas, where the continuing struggles over enslavement impelled by the American Revolution were complicated by the arrival of émigrés and discourses of self-liberation derived from the upheavals in the French Caribbean. In this sense the Age of Revolution can indeed be seen as a single, over-arching process, albeit one that consists of ‘the massively knotted and complex histories of special but nevertheless overlapping and interconnected experiences’.⁵⁷

The often spectacularly explosive and mercurial aspect of that process, the sense that ‘society is at boiling point and therefore fluid’ owed a great deal to this intensely tangled, circuitous and polygenetic character. Amid the dense web of

⁵⁶ Bayly, *Birth of the Modern World*, 108; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 192, 80–81; Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiii (Said’s emphasis). I demur from Bayly’s view of the United States as an exception to this pattern; whatever the limits of the nineteenth-century federal government, the simple fact of its existence constituted an enormous augmentation of colonial state structures.

On the influence of nationalism, the nation state and the traditions of national historiography see also Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality* (2nd edn. Oxford: OUP, 1992); Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 1–31, 44–58; Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 1–19; Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*, 1–2.

⁵⁷ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 36.

connections that enmeshed the Atlantic world, it was all the more true that ‘what people don’t know is what what they do does.’ Their actions could be loaded with tangential consequences that generated far-reaching chains of unintended side-effects. In turn, the latter might draw new protagonists and issues into contention within an increasingly complex matrix of interactions whose results were chaotically unpredictable. The intricate course of one such sequence of inadvertent causes and effects, slavery’s irruption into the dynamics of the American Revolution, was traced out in chapter one. We have also seen how that process was itself the point of departure for other ‘vectors of revolution’, not the least unlikely of which was that played out in the Bahamas after 1783.⁵⁸

For those who lived through it, the way in which this ‘Crowd of unlooked for Events’ might suddenly and with little or no warning make established structures, alignments and relationships of all kinds seem protean and contingent could be at once a bewildering and disorienting, but also an empowering experience, opening up beguiling new vistas of possibility. An Atlantic without slaves had appeared a far-fetched notion indeed in the early 1770s, when Maurice Morgann had whimsically observed that ‘the time may come, at least the speculation is pleasing’; variously the stuff of utopian fantasy, earnestly unworldly moral stricture, and the cultural trope that Paul Gilroy has termed the ‘turn towards death’.⁵⁹ Over the following years, conceptions of ‘the auspicious æra of universal freedom’ would come to seem increasingly plausible: not only for enslaved people considering how they might ‘finish the business themselves’ and ‘their zealous friends’ in the antislavery movements, but also for those who looked on ‘the prospect of existence under such circumstances’ as ‘a subject of disgust rather than of desire.’⁶⁰

Variations on these themes informed the projects of substantive transformation that people in the Bahamas sought to realize, individually and collectively, in the

⁵⁸ James, *Black Jacobins*, xix; Michel Foucault, quoted in Mullin, *Africa in America*, 235; Linebaugh & Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 241. On the role of ‘chaos and complexity’ in the ‘non-linear dynamics’ of the Age of Revolution see Langley, *Americas in the Age of Revolution*, 4–9.

⁵⁹ [Morgann], *Plan*, 33; Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 60–71. People of the twenty-fifth century recall the violent overthrow of slavery in Louis Sébastien Mercier, *L’An deux mille quatre cent quarante. Rêve s’il en fût jamais* (London, 1771), translated into English by W. Hooper as *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*, 2 vols. (London, 1772). On the significance of Mercier’s novel and its influence on the Abbé Raynal see Dubois, *Colony of Citizens*, 64–6; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 81–2, 84–6, 170, n. 21.

⁶⁰ [Morgann], *Plan*, 33; Stephen Fuller to Lord Sydney, 29 January 1788, quoted in Scott, ‘Common Wind’, 130; *Bahama Gazette*, 18 October 1793.

years after 1783: African-Americans trying to make freedom the ultimate destination of their journey out of the mainland plantation system; Loyalist slaveholders looking to recapitulate in ‘this hitherto obscure Colony’ the kind of slave regime from which ‘nothing escaped, nothing, and no one’; Dunmore, idiosyncratically pursuing a largely unarticulated ideal of an authoritarian paternalism under which the slaveholder might be ‘kept in awe by a higher and stronger hand, that would instantly crush him, should avaricious views of private emolument tempt him to dishonour or endamage the community.’⁶¹

None of these projects proved successful within the scope of the lives of those who had undertaken them. Their results were frequently very different, and indeed sometimes almost completely contrary to what was intended, so much so that they can now seem anomalous, contradictory or irrelevant. Non-white Bahamians had not developed their ‘enclaves of independence’ in the 1780s with a view to facilitating the formulation of plans ‘to put themselves in the situation’ that ‘the black people’ were not yet in in Saint-Domingue, any more than the unlikely design of persuading them to ‘Fight and take the Country’ was meant to reaffirm the power of the slaveholders. But these unrealized possibilities nonetheless matter a great deal in terms of historians’ more conventional concern with what *did* happen. Accounting for how the Bahamas had turned out by 1800 entails tracing out the multiple and layered contingencies of the complex, polyhedral interplay of the various efforts to fulfil these visions of how the future might be made different from the past. In doing so, it becomes rather easier to appreciate how much the outcomes of the Age of Revolution can more generally be seen as products of ‘the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies, and so on, that at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal, and necessary.’⁶²

A long time ago, Atlantic slavery was designated a ‘subject one must study in detail, to see what the bourgeoisie makes of itself and of the labourer, wherever it can, without restraint, model the world after its own image’. The first part of this injunction

⁶¹ ‘Memorial of the Planters and other Inhabitants of the Island of Abaco’, 6 January 1788, CO23/27/119; ‘Memorial and Representation of the Subscribers... Inhabitants of New Providence’, Nassau, 2 January 1788, CO23/27/102; Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York: Knopf, 1947), 117; [James White], *Hints for a Specific Plan for an Abolition of the Slave Trade, and for the Relief of the Negroes in the British West Indies* (London, 1788), 19; the passage refers to the position of colonial slaveholders under the French monarchy.

⁶² Foucault, ‘Questions of Method’, 227–8.

has certainly been taken up over the last few decades. The idea that ‘capitalist, racial slavery’ is ‘internal to modernity and intrinsically modern’ has been much more sporadically pursued until quite recently, and its implications are still to be fully explored and digested.⁶³ Exposition of the extent to which the Age of Revolution’s ‘genesis, process, outcome and influence’ were bound up with the lived experience of enslavement, ‘something that marked out blacks as the first truly modern people’, remains very much an unfinished project.⁶⁴ Nor, in some ways, has it been made any easier by recent trends in revolutionary historiography. Rejection of ‘static social categories and mechanistic explanations’, and an increasing pessimism as to ‘the difficulty – nay, the outright impossibility – of knowing “the social” in any sort of unmediated fashion’ has meant that ‘the relationship between rhetorical meaning and social experience seems as elusive as ever’. In practice, this can easily mean that the latter is compartmentalised off from what ends up looking worryingly like ‘a revolution (and a modernity) only of the few’.⁶⁵

One attraction of the kind of approach I have tried to pursue here is the scope it opens up to present unashamedly big stories about the Age of Revolution that have important and at times pivotal roles for the agency of protagonists who have been marginalised by history in both senses of the word.⁶⁶ Insofar as it entails cutting across temporal, spatial and conceptual boundaries and hierarchies, it also hopefully evades the kind of recuperation whereby, for instance, ‘historians... have incorporated the history of the rebels who were willing to risk their lives to escape from American history into a part of that history.’⁶⁷

⁶³ Karl Marx, *Capital. A critique of political economy*, tr. Samuel Moore & Edward Aveling, 3 vols. (1887; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1954 edn.), 1:704, n.; Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 220. In the twentieth century, this approach to slavery was pioneered by black writers influenced by Marxism; see W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & co., 1935), esp. 3–16; James, *Black Jacobins*; Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; London: Andre Deutsch, 1964 edn.). Notable recent explorations of relationships between slavery, capitalism, and modernity include Blackburn, *Making*; Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, slavery and freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Chaplin, *Anxious Pursuit*; Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*.

⁶⁴ Linebaugh & Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 212; Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 221.

⁶⁵ Rebecca L. Spang, ‘Paradigms and Paranoia: How modern is the French Revolution?’, *American Historical Review*, 108:1 (February 2003), 144, 143; Foner, *Tom Paine* (2005 edn.), xix (third quotation).

⁶⁶ See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 2–4.

⁶⁷ Johnson, ‘Time and Revolution’, 209.

In the Bahamas, of course, the casualties of the ‘victory of nations’⁶⁸ have included people like Dunmore and the Loyalists. Their byzantine and often tiresome political infighting becomes more intelligible, and hopefully rather more interesting to twenty-first century historians, when it is appreciated how far non-white and enslaved people shaped the terms of reference, process and outcome of those struggles. Such elite white men would be ironic beneficiaries of an approach that entails trying to engage with subaltern initiatives and agendas on their own terms whilst recognising their wider significance. But it will be very apt if the experience of Bahamians can serve to facilitate a perspective that would surely be directly relevant to their own interests as a nation.

⁶⁸ Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*, 11.

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Appendix
Bahamian Manumissions, 1782–1800

No#	Date	Name	Remarks	How Freed/ By whom	Source
1	1782	Philis		Will of J. Butler of S. Ca.	RFS, NF, M, 284
2	1782	Andrew	child of #1, husband of #5	Will of J. Butler of S. Ca.	RFS, NF, M, 284
3	1782	Anthony	child of #1	Will of J. Butler of S. Ca.	RFS, NF, M, 284
4	1782	Sally	child of #1	Will of J. Butler of S. Ca.	RFS, NF, M, 284
5	1782	Mary	wife of #2	Will of J. Butler of S. Ca.	RFS, NF, M, 284
6	1782	Illinois, Samuel		Cert. of John Hunt	NF, N, 62
7	1782	S_____? Esther	possible duplicate of #16	Governor's Certificate	NF
8	1782	Edinburgh		William Baldwin	RFS, NF
9	1782	George	purchase £40 sterling	Alex. McBeth	RFS
10	1782	Gene?		General McArthur	RFS, NF, O, 58
11	1782	Brown, William	"Military Service"	Commissioners of Claims	RFS, NF
12	1782	Brown, Ben	"Military Service"	Commissioners of Claims	RFS, NF
13	1782	Billy		purchase: Charles Goodwin	RFS
14	1782	Castleton		Abraham Adderley	RFS
15	1782	Scottowe, Betty		Thomas Scottowe	RFS
16	1782	Scott, Esther		Governor's Certificate	RFS
17	1782	Tucker, Duarh?		Joseph Tucker	RFS
18	1782	Celia	"mulatto woman"	Daniel Bough	M, 210
19	1782	Phillis	child of #18	Daniel Bough	M, 210
20	1782	Bob	child of #18	Daniel Bough	M, 210
21	1782	Milly	child of #18	Daniel Bough	M, 210
22	1782	Sylvia	"mulatto woman"	Hopkins Pi___e?	M, 102
23	1782	John	child of #22	Will of Thomas Butler	RFS, M, 284
24	1782	Philis	child of #22	Will of Thomas Butler	RFS, M, 284
25	1783	Slater, Nancy		Thomas Slater	RFS, NF
26	1783	Smith, Mary aka Gow		James Gow	NF
27	1783	Gould, Hannah	bequest	James Gould	NF
28	1783	Thompson, Dinah	bequest	Ben Thompson	RFS, NF
29	1783	Tyrone	"within British Lines"; FP NY	Proclamation	RFS, NF, O, 54
30	1783	Williams, Seabod		Proclamation	NF

31	1783	Williams/ Wilkins, Philis		Proclamation	RFS, NF
32	1783	Wilkins, Kabod?	cert. Major E. Williams, Abaco	Proclamation	N, 297
33	1783	Willoughby		Fa[aithful] Ser[vice]: James Gordon	NF, O, 118
34	1783	Williams, Charles		Proclamation	NF
35	1783	Galphin, Cyrus		Justices' Certificate	NF
36	1783	Galphin, Charlotte		Justices' Certificate	NF
37	1783	Galphin, Clarinda		Justices' Certificate	NF
38	1783	Galphin, Chloe		Justices' Certificate	NF
39	1783	Galphin, Jamo?		Justices' Certificate	NF
40	1783	Galphin, Cyrus		Justices' Certificate	NF
41	1783	Galphin, Charlotte		Justices' Certificate	NF
42	1783	Hagar		Proclamation	NF
43	1783	Hall, Henry		Proclamation	NF
44	1783	Powell, Susannah		Certificate	NF
45	1783	Powell, Joseph		Certificate	NF
46	1783	Caesar	purchase £25, Fla.	Thomas Brown	RFS, NF, M, 383
47	1783	Corant, Henrietta		Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF
48	1783	Beck	purchase £118.10.4	Samuel Hunt Jenkins?	RFS, NF, V, 113
49	1783	Tom	son of #48	Samuel Hunt Jenkins?	RFS, NF, V, 113
50	1783	Diana		Dr. John Lorimer	RFS, NF, M, 244
51	1783	Secundo	sailor, age 48	John Baldwin	RFS, M, 483
52	1784	Lundy, Becky		St. Augustine, Certificate	NF
53	1784	Rocke, Nancy		St. Augustine, Certificate	NF
54	1784	Richards, Jesse		Governor's Certificate	NF
55	1784	Ratteen?		Governor's Certificate	NF
56	1784	Steward/ Stewart, James	free man in N Ca. before war	Certificate	NF, M, 101
57	1784	Peggy	also 10s. purchase	Fa Ser: James Hume	NF, M, 325
58	1784	McKenzie, J__?		George McKenzie	NF
59	1784	Nanny	"within Br. Lines" – McArthur	Proclamation	NF, M, 147
60	1784	Anwhit?, Peggy		Certificate of her mother	RFS, NF
61	1784	Nan		Proclamation	NF

62	1784	Carter, James	born free in Virginia. "Came with col. Deveaux".	Cert. of John Boyd, JP	RFS, NF, M, 47
63	1784	Bob	"within Br. Lines", St. Augustine, June 1784	Cert. from Gen McArthur	RFS, NF, M, 69
64	1784	Amos	free pass, St. Augustine, August 1785	Proclamation/Gen McArthur	RFS, M, 157
65	1784	Amos, Caesar		Proclamation/Gen McArthur	RFS, M, 157
66	1784	Amos, Prince		Proclamation/Gen McArthur	RFS, M, 157
67	1784	Amos, Judy	wife of #64	Proclamation/Gen McArthur	RFS, M, 157
68	1784	Amos, Elsey		Proclamation/Gen McArthur	RFS, M, 157
69	1784	Amos, Rachael		Proclamation/Gen McArthur	RFS, M, 157
70	1784	Amos, Lizzey		Proclamation/Gen McArthur	RFS, M, 157
71	1784	Willis, Hester	Abaco, £25 NY currency	John Cameron, purchase	M, 338
72	1784	Jack	St. Augustine. Tonym/ McArthur	Proclamation	NF, M, 215
73	1784	Cox, Jerry	"my son"	Timothy Cox	RFS, NF, V, 280
74	1785	Kate	purchase, 50 pieces of eight	Joseph Thompson	RFS, NF, M, 198
75	1785	Thompson, Benjamin	child of #74	Joseph Thompson	RFS, NF, M, 198
76	1785	Thompson, Kitty	child of #74	Joseph Thompson	RFS, NF, M, 198
77	1785	Thompson, Juliet Granville	child of #74	Joseph Thompson	RFS, NF, M, 198
78	1785	Weaver, Maria		Fa Ser: James Gordon	RFS, NF, O, 120
79	1785	Allick	purchase from James Gould	Lt. Alexander Chisholm	NF, M, 242
80	1785	Nanny		Fa Ser: Alexr. Roxburgh	NF, M, 262
81	1785	Sarah		Fa Ser: Alexr. Roxburgh	NF, M, 263
82	1785	Hodgson, Judith		Dugald Evans	NF
83	1785	Kemp, Priscilla	purchase, 100 pieces of eight	Wm. Kemp	NF, M, 204
84	1785	Kemp, Cluny?	child of #83	Wm. Kemp	M, 204
85	1785	(Thompson), Kate		pur. Of Jo. Thompson	NF
86	1785	Nero, John		Fa Ser: Thomas Graham	NF

87	1785	Cox, Dim	purchase, 775 pieces of eight	George Tucker	RFS, NF, M, 180
88	1785	Cumba	purchase, S. Ca., 1778	Samuel Carson	M, 177
89	1785	Green, James		Justices' Certificate	N, 291
90	1786	Knowles, Molly		William Gibson	NF
91	1784	Mitchell, Bess	certificate from Thomas Brown/ McArthur	Proclamation	NF, M, 136
92	1786	W___?		Lord Dunmore [incomplete line]	NF
93	1786	Newton, Maria	bequest	___? Newton	NF
94	1786	Robinson, Mary	false indenture	Justices' Certificate	NF, M, 343
95	1786	Romeo		Justices' Certificate	NF
96	1786	Evans, James	husband of #97	Justices' Certificate	NF, M, 335
97	1786	Evans, Harriett	wife of #96	Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF, M, 335
98	1786	Evans, George	child of #96-7	Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF, M, 335
99	1786	Evans, Clarinda	child of #96-7	Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF, M, 335
100	1786	Essex		Mary Sanders	RFS, NF
101	1786	Frazier, Jemmy		Justices' Certificate	NF
102	1786	Frazier, Lydia		Justices' Certificate	NF
103	1786	Frazier, Betty		Justices' Certificate	NF
104	1786	Frazier, Polly		Justices' Certificate	NF
105	1786	Frazier, Bristol		Justices' Certificate	NF
106	1786	Patrick, Tom	expired indenture	Justices' Certificate	NF, M, 497
107	1786	Jenny	"British lines", Charleston	Justices' Certificate	NF, M, 340
108	1786	Lydia	child of #107	Justices' Certificate	M, 340
109	1786	Betty	child of #107	Justices' Certificate	M, 340
110	1786	Polly	child of #107	Justices' Certificate	M, 340
111	1786	Bristol	child of #107	Justices' Certificate	M, 340
112	1786	What		Benjamin Ingram	N, 4
113	1787	Sturup, Jane		James Sturup	NF
114	1787	Scotland		Jehordan Turner	RFS, NF, O 290
115	1787	Smith, Thomas		Justices' Certificate	NF, N, 225
116	1787	Smith, Thomas		Justices' Certificate	NF, O, 423
117	1787	Williams, Dick		Fa Ser: Tylston Woollam	NF, N, 290
118	1787	Glormer?, Sam		Proclamation	NF
119	1787	Knowles, Rebecca	"my true loving and faithful wife or House Keeper"	Love & aff. Joseph Knowles	NF, N, 30
120	1787	Knowles, Rebecca	daughter of #119	his Child Joseph Knowles	NF
121	1787	Bell, Anne		?	NF

122	1787	Bell, James		William Moss: Certificate	RFS
123	1787	Carolina		Commissioners of Claims	RFS
124	1787	Green, James	born free; New York free pass	Justices' Certificate	N, 223
125	1788	Brown, James	indentured for 3 years in 1783	Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF, O, 7
126	1788	Bush, William		Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF
127	1788	Green, James		Commissioners of Claims	NF
128	1788	McKenzie, Flora		purchase, John Miller	NF
129	1788	Wallace, Eve		Thomas Wallace	RFS, NF
130	1788	Rankin, Mathias		Justices' Certificate	NF
131	1788	Young, Jenny		Thomas Ross	NF
132	1788	H__p__y?		Commissioners of Claims	NF
133	1788	Howe, Patty		Governor's Certificate	NF
134	1788	Lambert, John		Justices' Certificate	NF
135	1788	Kelly, James		Governor's Certificate	NF
136	1788	Mathias		Justices' Certificate	NF, N, 291
137	1788	McDonald, ___?		Lord Dunmore	NF
138	1788	Moultrie, Sarah		Justices' Certificate	NF, O, 7
139	1788	Quash		Justices' Certificate	NF, N, 228
140	1788	Bob	"claim of Right"	Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, O, 134
141	1788	Dixon, John		Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF, O, 157
142	1788	Grant, Henrietta	"mustee" woman	Justices' Certificate	N, 293
143	1788	Romeo		Justices' Certificate	N, 297
144	1788	George, Thomas	freed from indenture	Justices' Certificate	O, 54
145	1789	Charleton, John		Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF
146	1789	Charleton, Joe		Justices' Certificate	NF
147	1789	Charleton, Amoretta		Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF
148	1789	Charleton, John	child of #145	Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF
149	1789	Charleton, Jane		Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF
150	1789	Charleton, Maria		Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF
151	1789	Charleton, Sue		Commissioners of Claims	RFS
152	1789	Sentry, George		Justices' Certificate	NF
153	1789	Sephard, Mary Ann		Baptised in Westminster	RFS, NF
154	1789	Green, Lucy		Governor's Certificate	NF
155	1789	Green, George		Governor's Certificate	NF

156	1789	Green, Caesar		Governor's Certificate	NF
157	1789	George		Justices' Certificate	NF
158	1789	Frank	expired indenture	Certificate of Thomas Brown	RFS, NF, O, 299
159	1789	—ne?		Justices' Certificate	NF
160	1789	Cox, Member		Edward Cox	RFS, NF
161	1789	Barry, Bob		Fa Ser: George Barry	RFS, NF
162	1790	Scriven, Sambo		Justices' Certificate	NF
163	1790	Scriven, Agar		Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF
164	1790	Roberts, ____?	bequest	John Roberts	NF
165	1790	Will		Proclamation	NF
166	1790	Wilson, Will		John Wilson	NF
167	1790	Esther		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
168	1790	Jimmy		Governor's Certificate	NF
169	1790	Micklethwaite, Sarah		Henrietta Micklethwaite	NF
170	1790	Barry, Thomas		Fa Ser: Joseph Saunders	RFS, NF
171	1790	Booby aka Hall, Sarah		Joseph Hall: gift	RFS, NF
172	1790	Chatham, Moll		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
173	1790	Chatham, Thomas		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
174	1790	Bob	"Good Evidence"	Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
175	1791	Charleton, Pompey		Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF
176	1791	Spencer, Will		Sam Spencer	NF
177	1791	Thompson, Joan		Fa Ser: Joseph Thompson	RFS, NF
178	1791	Turner, Dinah		Gravesend Shoulding	RFS, NF
179	1791	Shestal? Archibald		Governor's Certificate	NF
180	1791	Wishfull, Isaac		Governor's Certificate	NF
181	1791	Williams, George		Governor's Certificate	NF
182	1791	Williams, John		Governor's Certificate	NF
183	1791	Allen, Sue		Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF
184	1791	Elliot, Samuel		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
185	1791	Elliott, Thomas		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
186	1791	Elliott, Sarah		Governor's Certificate	NF
187	1791	Elliott, Priscilla		Governor's Certificate	NF
188	1791	Elliott, Jenny		Governor's Certificate	NF
189	1791	Elliott, Sally		Governor's Certificate	NF
190	1791	Frank, John		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
191	1791	Hannah		Governor's Certificate	NF
192	1791	Jack, John		Governor's Certificate	NF
193	1791	____?, Johnston		Governor's Certificate	NF
194	1791	[John]son?, Harry		Governor's Certificate	NF
195	1791	Lane, Edinbro'		Governor's Certificate	NF

196	1791	Martin, William		Governor's Certificate	NF
197	1791	Baldwin, Juba		Jeremiah Tinker	RFS
198	1791	Falconer, Clarinda		Susanna Falconer	RFS
199	1792	Roberts, Nancy		Governor's Certificate	NF
200	1792	Roberts, Mary		Governor's Certificate	NF
201	1792	Rachel		Governor's Certificate	NF
202	1792	R___?, Tom		Governor's Certificate	NF
203	1792	Rumer, Robert		Fa. Ser.: Robert Rumer	NF
204	1792	Thomas/ Thompson, Sarah		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
205	1792	Thomson, John		Governor's Certificate	RFS
206	1792	Sharpe, Peter		Governor's Certificate	NF
207	1792	Sandy, Dianah		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
208	1792	Sandy, Judy		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
209	1792	Susannah		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
210	1792	Harriet		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
211	1792	St__?, Thomas		Governor's Certificate	NF
212	1792	Webb, Thomas		Governor's Certificate	NF
213	1792	Hall, B_h_g_h??		B__y? Hall	NF
214	1792	Hunter, Mary		Governor's Certificate	NF
215	1792	Jones, Sarah		Governor's Certificate	NF
216	1792	Lewis, Clarinda		Judith Lewis	NF
217	1792	Keizer?, Jean		Governor's Certificate	NF
218	1792	Kelbon?, Bristol		Governor's Certificate	NF
219	1792	Affey?, Matty?		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
220	1792	Affey, Rebecca		Proclamation/ Dunmore	RFS, NF
221	1792	Affey, Nanny		Proclamation/ Dunmore	RFS, NF
222	1792	Bob		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
223	1792	Broadfield, Peggy		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
224	1792	Carter, Aaron		Governor's Certificate	NF
225	1793	Dixon, Bob		Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF
226	1793	Cuffee, Bisson [?]		Governor's Certificate	NF
227	1793	Cuffee, Benila[?]		Governor's Certificate	NF
228	1793	Baits, Cuffee		Governor's Certificate	RFS, V, 172
229	1793	Cuff	son of #228	Governor's Certificate	RFS, V, 172
230	1793	Betty	former property of Dunmore	William Barton £10 purchase	RFS, NF, P2, 516
231	1793	Clarinda		Fa Ser: Denniston & Taylor	RFS, NF
232	1793	Collins, Abraham		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF D2, 176
233	1793	Miller, Thomas		Governor's Certificate	NF

234	1793	Murray, Thomas		Governor's Certificate	NF
235	1793	S___up? Davey		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
236	1793	Sarah		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, W, 513
237	1793	Sara	possible duplicate of #236	Governor's Certificate	NF
238	1793	Barry, Bu__?		___? Barry	NF
239	1793	Watkinson, Lydia		Thomas Watkinson	NF
240	1793	Tanyard, Tom		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
241	1793	Thompson, John		Governor's Certificate	NF, V, 141
242	1793	Tucker, Betty	"my wife"	Castle Duncorne	RFS, NF
243	1793	Sl__w?, James		Governor's Certificate	NF
244	1793	Williams, Prince		Governor's Certificate	NF
245	1793	Williamson, Jack		Thomas Williamson	NF
246	1793	Williamson, Elizabeth	bequest	Thomas Williamson	RFS, NF
247	1793	Williamson, Sarah	bequest	Thomas Williamson	RFS
248	1793	Williamson, Venus	bequest	Thomas Williamson	RFS
249	1793	Ruth		Fa Ser: Martha Albury	RFS, NF, V, 264
250	1793	Evans, James		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
251	1793	Green, John		Governor's Certificate	NF
252	1793	Grimmage?		Governor's Certificate	NF
253	1793	Graham, Brutus		Governor's Certificate	NF, V, 141
254	1793	Graham, Sally?	wife of #253	Governor's Certificate	V, 141
255	1793	Gunn, Sally	"my Mulatto child"	George Gunn	NF, V, 155
256	1793	Flora		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, V, 198
257	1793	Kingston	child of #273	Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, V, 198
258	1793	Heather	child of #273	Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, V, 198
259	1793	Rankin	child of #273	Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, V, 198
260	1793	Francis, John		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
261	1793	Hall, James		Governor's Certificate	NF
262	1793	Hall, William		Governor's Certificate	NF
263	1793	Hall, Joseph		Governor's Certificate	NF
264	1793	Jackson, Anthony		Governor's Certificate	NF
265	1793	Lambert, John		Governor's Certificate	NF
266	1793	Lightbourn		Governor's Certificate	NF
267	1793	Lucker, Cuffee		Governor's Certificate	NF

268	1793	McPherson, Ben		Governor's Certificate	NF
269	1793	McPherson, Grace		Governor's Certificate	NF
270	1793	McPherson, George		Governor's Certificate	NF
271	1793	Murray, Thomas		Governor's Certificate	NF
272	1793	Phillips, Charlotte		Governor's Certificate	NF
273	1793	Anthony, John	husband of #274	Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, V, 142
274	1793	Anthony, Susannah	wife of #273	Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, V, 142
275	1793	Beah, Cuffee		Governor's Certificate	NF
276	1793	Bath, Thomas		Governor's Certificate/ military service	RFS, NF
277	1793	Cox, James		Governor's Certificate	NF
278	1793	Chatham		Governor's Certificate	NF
279	1793	Duncombe, Will		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
280	1793	Amoss, Jeanie		Manumission	RFS
281	1793	Armstrong, Jane		Proclamation	RFS
282	1793	Allen, Lucy Smith		Justices' Certificate	RFS
283	1793	Beak, Cuffee		Dunmore's Certificate/ military service	RFS
284	1794	McDough, Cato		Governor's Certificate	NF, W, 512
285	1794	Butler, Miley		James Butler	NF, W, 525
286	1794	Mason, Silvia		John Mason	NF
287	1794	Mason, Alexander		John Mason	NF
288	1794	Gamble, Jenny	bequest	William Gamble	NF
289	1794	Gamble, Edward	bequest	William Gamble	NF
290	1794	Gamble, Becky	bequest	William Gamble	NF
291	1794	Thompson, Roller?		Fa Ser: Robert Thompson	NF
292	1794	Venus, Catherine		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, P2, 243
293	1794	Lewis, James		Judith Lewis	nf
294	1794	Cox, Thomas	"my brother"	Timothy Cox	RFS, NF, V, 255
295	1794	Bonamy, Nanny	bequest	Broomfield Bonamy	RFS
296	1794	Falconer, Lucy		Thomas Smith	RFS
297	1794	Falconer, Lucy jr.		Thomas Smith	RFS
298	1794	Falconer, Nelly		Thomas Smith	RFS
299	1794	Thompson, Peter		Richard Thompson	RFS
300	1794	Essex		Governor's Certificate	V, 264

301	1795	Harry		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, W, 387
302	1795	Cox, Anthony		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, W, 521
303	1795	Cox, Rebecca		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, W, 522
304	1795	Cox, Hannah		Timothy Cox	RFS, NF
305	1795	Ferguson, John		Ansell Ferguson	NF
306	1795	Lowe, Jack		Benjamin Low	NF
307	1795	Tattnall, Dye		Fa Ser: Josiah Tattnall	RFS, NF
308	1795	Taylor, Lucinda		Good Causes Alex. Taylor	RFS, NF
309	1795	Waring, Sarah		Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF
310	1795	Johnston, Peggy		Anthony Roxburgh	NF
311	1795	Martin, William		Governor's Certificate	NF, W, 388
312	1795	Bremner, Lucy	bequest	Alexander Bremner	RFS
313	1795	Bremner, Maria	bequest	Alexander Bremner	RFS
314	1796	Bunn, Jim		Fa Ser: Denniston & Taylor	RFS, NF
315	1796	Card, Sarah		Fa Ser: Hugh Deane	RFS, NF
316	1796	Card, Will		Fa Ser: Hugh Deane	RFS, NF
317	1796	Sands?, Peter		William Sands	NF
318	1796	Perpall, Jose		John Perpall	NF
319	1796	Perpall, Jack		John Perpall	NF
320	1796	Roworth, Elsey		Governor's Certificate	NF
321	1796	Ross, Sylvia		Fa Ser: Lord Dunmore	NF
322	1796	Routledge, Wilkins		Governor's Certificate	NF
323	1796	Routledge, Mary		Governor's Certificate	NF
324	1796	Rankin, Jenny		Governor's Certificate	NF
325	1796	Ross, Jenny		Henry Yonge	NF
326	1796	Turner, Pompey		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
327	1796	Francis, Rebecca		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, Z, 233
328	1796	Francis, John		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, Z, 233
329	1796	Francis, David Darrall		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
330	1796	Francis, Joseph Darrall		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
331	1796	Johnston, Sylla?		Governor's Certificate	NF
332	1796	Ferguson, John		Anscott Ferguson	RFS, NF
333	1796	Keel, John		Fa Ser: Lord Dunmore	NF
334	1796	Mitchell, Sally		Governor's Certificate	NF
335	1796	Mitchell, Beck		Governor's Certificate	NF

336	1796	Phillis		Governor's Certificate	NF
337	1796	Deane, Betty	mother of #338-342	Fa Ser: Hugh Deane	RFS, NF
338	1796	Deane, Nanny	daughter of #337	Fa Ser: Hugh Deane	RFS, NF
339	1796	Deane, Polly	daughter of #337	Fa Ser: Hugh Deane	RFS, NF
340	1796	Deane, Jenny	daughter of #337	Fa Ser: Hugh Deane	RFS, NF
341	1796	Deane, Charlotte	daughter of #337	Fa Ser: Hugh Deane	RFS, NF
342	1796	Deane, Robert	son of #337	Fa Ser: Hugh Deane	RFS, NF
343	1796	Dean, Ann		Celia Lord	RFS
344	1796	Stephens, James Josiah		Governor's Certificate	RFS
345	1796	Stephens, Martha		Governor's Certificate	RFS
346	1797	Baillou, Thomas		Grant & Baillou	RFS, NF
347	1797	Begbie, Harriet		Ser. Alexander Begbie	RFS, NF
348	1797	Barnett, Joe		Jonathan Barnett	RFS, NF
349	1797	Cain, James		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
350	1797	Spatcher??. John		John Spatcher?	NF
351	1797	Spatcher??. James		John Spatcher?	NF
352	1797	Sh_p_? Thomas?		Justices' Certificate	NF
353	1797	Doll		Stephen Haven	RFS, NF, D2, 107
354	1797	Thompson, Jenny		John Thomas Thompson	RFS, NF
355	1797	Thompson, Flora		John Thomas Thompson	RFS
356	1797	Bowman, Warwick		Justices' Certificate	RFS, NF
357	1797	Williams, Joseph		Certificate	NF
358	1797	Wallace, Thomas		Governor's Certificate	NF
359	1797	Emester?, Joseph		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
360	1797	Esther		Ser: John Tull	NF
361	1797	Hunt, Jacob		Governor's Certificate	NF
362	1797	Hudson, Joe		Purchase	NF
363	1797	London		Fa Ser: Sarah Thompson	NF
364	1797	Lucy		Governor's Certificate	NF
365	1797	Lee, Rachel		Governor's Certificate	NF
366	1797	Lane, Jack		Ed. Lane	NF
367	1797	Quash, Cato		Governor's Certificate	NF
368	1797	Dalkeith, Sylvia		Fa Ser: John Dalkeith	RFS, NF
369	1797	Dalkeith, Anthony		Fa Ser: John Dalkeith	RFS, NF

370	1797	Dalkeith, Tina		Fa Ser: John Dalkeith	RFS, NF
371	1797	Wilson, Nan		John Thomas Thompson	RFS
372	1797	Wilson, Rosetta		John Thomas Thompson	RFS
373	1797	Wilson, Jane		John Thomas Thompson	RFS
374	1797	Robert		Justices' Certificate	Z, 337
375	1798	Bejot, Felicite		Archibald McKenzie	RFS, NF
376	1798	Brown, William		Fa Ser: Susannah Brown	RFS, NF
377	1798	Cox, Rose		Edward Cox	RFS, NF
378	1798	Cox, Nan		Edward Cox	RFS, NF
379	1798	Cox, Rosette		Edward Cox	RFS, NF
380	1798	Cox, June		Edward Cox	RFS, NF
381	1798	Hall, William		Wm. George Hall	NF
382	1798	Jack		John Perpall	NF
383	1798	Jones, Mary		Fa. Ser: R. Jones	NF
384	1798	Jourdaine, Mary		Fa Ser: Aug Jordaine	NF
385	1798	Ingraham, James		good causes: James Ingraham	NF
386	1798	Martin, Nancy		Purchase James Webster	NF
387	1798	Martin, George		Purchase James Webster	NF
388	1798	Moxey, Cato		Will Martin	NF
389	1798	Saffold, Jess		Governor's Certificate	D2, 57
390	1798	Spe__rer?, Bob		notar: Certificate	NF
391	1798	Sterling, Wal? Jeffrey		Fa Ser: WG Hall	NF
392	1798	Scott, John Petty		John Petty	NF
393	1798	Campbell, Lucy	bequest	Archibald Campbell	RFS, NF
394	1798	Campbell, Phillis	bequest	Archibald Campbell	RFS, NF
395	1798	Campbell, Lucy	bequest	Archibald Campbell	RFS, NF
396	1798	Campbell, Libby	bequest	Archibald Campbell	RFS, NF
397	1798	Gray, Peggy	bequest	George Gray	NF
398	1798	Gray, Polly	bequest	George Gray	NF
399	1798	Nielson, Mary	bequest	James? Nielson	NF
400	1798	Nielson, Phoebe	bequest	James? Nielson	NF
401	1798	Nielson, Jack	bequest	James? Nielson	NF
402	1798	Nielson, Peggy	bequest	James? Nielson	NF
403	1798	Young, Prince	bequest	James Young	RFS, NF
404	1798	Tattnall, Maria Cattell		Fa Ser: Josiah Tattnall	RFS, NF
405	1798	Elliott, Rachel		Will of Samuel Elliott	RFS, NF

406	1798	Hunt, Tom		pur. Nath. Owens?	NF
407	1798	Hay, John		Governor's Certificate	NF
408	1798	Lynch, Flora		Governor's Certificate	NF
409	1798	Leah		Fa Ser: T. A. Halliday	NF
410	1798	Merillar, Martena	mother of #411- 412	Fa Ser: __? Merillar	NF
411	1798	Merillar, Disor?	child of #410	Fa Ser: __? Merillar	NF
412	1798	Merillar, Daniel	child of #410	Fa Ser: __? Merillar	NF
413	1798	Neeler, Benjamin		Governor's Certificate	NF, W, 513
414	1798	Dickinson, James		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF, D2, 58-9
415	1798	Spencer, Robert		Governor's Certificate	D2, 319
416	1799	Bush, Isaac		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
417	1799	Barry, Robert		Fa Ser: Lord Dunmore	RFS, NF
418	1799	Castilano, Joseph/George		Purchase	RFS, NF
419	1799	Cunningham, Patience	aka Heather	Purchase	NF
420	1799	Campbell, Joe		Duncan Taylor	NF
421	1799	Jane		Purchase, Timothy Cox	RFS, NF
422	1799	Joan [?]		Cert. from Duncan Taylor	NF
423	1799	Molly aka Peggy		M Akers [?] purchase	NF
424	1799	McNaughten, Jane		John McNaughten	NF
425	1799	McNaughten, Judith		John McNaughten	NF
426	1799	McNaughten, Jane		John McNaughten	NF
427	1799	McBride, Chloe		Alexander McBride	NF
428	1799	Miller, Dinah		Wife of Jubos? Miller	NF
429	1799	McKenzie, November		Purchase by Timothy Cox	NF
430	1799	Simms, Priscilla		Fa Ser: Paul & Tho Simms	RFS, NF
431	1799	Smith, Amelia		daughter of John Smith	RFS, NF
432	1799	Stevens, Will		John Stevens	NF
433	1799	Wilson, Beck		Governor's Certificate	RFS, NF
434	1799	Wallace, Anthony		Exort? Of James Wallace	NF
435	1799	Wallace, Delia		Thomas Wallace	RFS, NF
436	1799	Tattnall, Mary		Fa Ser: Josiah Tattnall	RFS, NF
437	1799	Ellis, Ann		Will of Charles Ellis	RFS, NF
438	1799	Ellis, John	bequest	Will of Charles Ellis	RFS, NF
439	1799	Grant, Theodore		purch. Sarah Grant	NF

440	1799	Gaskin, Nancy		Executors of Wm. Gaskin	NF
441	1799	Gaskin, William		Executors of Wm. Gaskin	NF
442	1799	Gaskin, Bella		Executors of Wm. Gaskin	NF
443	1799	Forbes, Jenny		Fa Ser: Dugald Forbes	NF
444	1799	Forbes, Hannah	purchase	Executors of Colin McKenzie	RFS, NF
445	1799	Hasting?, Joe		Governor's Certificate	NF
446	1799	McKenzie, Hannah		Colin McKenzie	NF
447	1799	Newbold, Elenor		Regard: Charles Fr_her?	NF
448	1799	Quasheta		Stephen Haven	NF
449	1799	Dean, Rosanna		Celia Lord	RFS
450	1799	Dean, ?		Celia Lord	RFS
451	1799	Ferguson, Dim		John Cox	RFS
452	1800	Clarke, Jack		Alexander Taylor: purchase	RFS
453	1800	Clarke, Sarah		Purchase	NF
454	1800	Cox, Edward		Pur. By his Father Ed. Cox	RFS, NF
455	1800	Clarke, Thomas		Ann Clarke (his Sister)	RFS, NF
456	1800	Cox, Castleton		Timothy Cox	RFS, NF
457	1800	Johnston, Fanny		By her daughter Ann Clark	NF
458	1800	Johnson, Doe		Governor's Certificate	NF
459	1800	McKenzie, Felicity		Alexander McKenzie	NF
460	1800	Marshall, Grace		David Marshall	NF
461	1800	Smith, Fortune		Fa Ser: Eliza Smith	RFS, NF
462	1800	Stewart, Alex		Anthony Stewart	NF
463	1800	Stewart, William		Anthony Stewart	NF
464	1800	Saunders, Joe		John Saunders	NF
465	1800	Smith, Rosette		Eliza Smith	RFS, NF
466	1800	Sutherland, Chloe		Purchase	RFS, NF
467	1800	Tattnall, Jane Phillis		Maria Francis Tattnall	RFS, NF
468	1800	Wells, Harriet		Fa Ser: John Boothe	RFS, NF
469	1800	Wallace, Stephen		Governor's Certificate	NF
470	1800	Watson, Suckey		George Watson	RFS, NF
471	1800	Robinson, John		Certificate	NF
472	1800	Rumer, Nelly		Robert Rumer	NF
473	1800	Lane, Sambo		Purchase	NF
474	1800	Pinder, Sarah		Purchase	NF

475	1800	Evans?, John		Joseph Evans?	RFS
476	1800	Smith, Margaret		James Gow	RFS

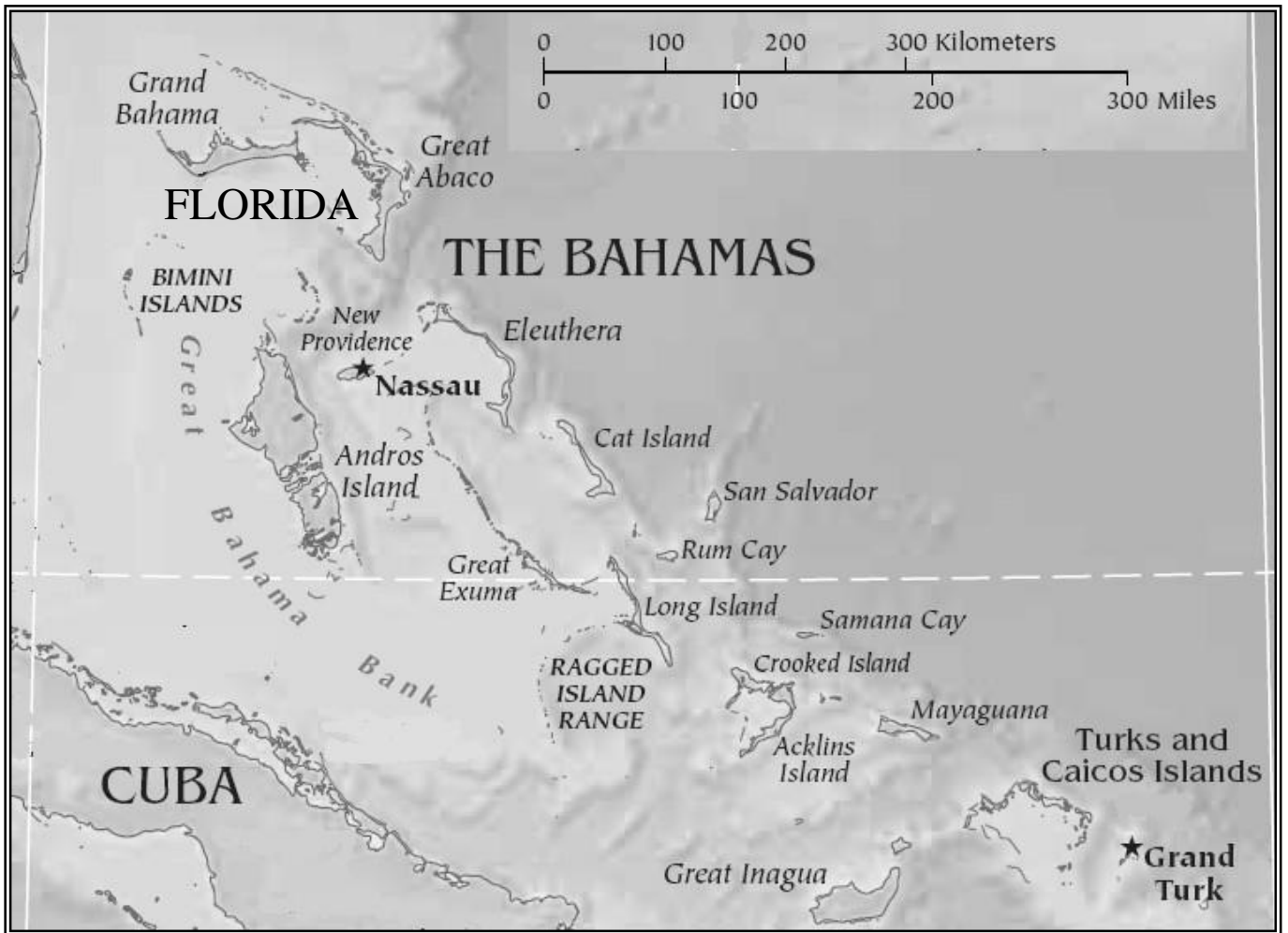
Key to Sources:

RFS: 'Register of Freed Slaves, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century', BDA

NF: 'Negro Freedoms', in 'Executive Council Minutes' microfilm, BDA

Other references are to the lettered Registry Office Books, RGD, followed by the relevant page number.

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