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# THE INTEREST

*How the British Establishment Resisted  
the Abolition of Slavery*



THE BODLEY HEAD  
LONDON

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

The Bodley Head, an imprint of Vintage,  
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,  
London SW1V 2SA

The Bodley Head is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies  
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First published in the UK by The Bodley Head in 2020

[www.vintage-books.co.uk](http://www.vintage-books.co.uk)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 9781847925718  
Trade paperback ISBN 9781847925725

Typeset in 11.5/14 pt Dante MT Std  
by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd, Pondicherry

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



# Preface

Shortly before 4.00 p.m. on 29 September 2015, the private plane carrying David Cameron and his retinue touched down at Norman Manley International Airport outside Kingston, Jamaica. As the prime minister disembarked, he was greeted with a red carpet, a ceremonial guard of honour, and a military brass band playing ‘God Save the Queen’. In the shadow of a canopy on the runway, Cameron shook hands with his Jamaican counterpart, Portia Simpson-Miller, and several members of her Cabinet. It was the first prime ministerial visit to this former British colony since 2001, and Cameron had been invited to address a joint sitting of Jamaica’s Houses of Parliament on the following day. In keeping with his commitment to spend 0.7 per cent of British GDP on international aid, he was expected to announce £300 million of investment in Caribbean infrastructure; accordingly, a press release from Downing Street gave details of a new fund that would ‘invest in roads, bridges and ports to help drive economic growth and development across the region’. The British prime minister was also expected to say something about slavery.<sup>2</sup>

For almost 200 years, Jamaica had been the largest and most valuable slave colony in the British Empire, and by the early nineteenth century there were more enslaved people in Jamaica – over 300,000 – than there were people of any description in any British city except London. Some of the legacies of this history are obvious. Jamaica’s three counties are Surrey, Middlesex, and Cornwall, while the island’s parishes include Manchester and Westmoreland; Sabina Park in Kingston is one of the great crucibles of cricket; and the tripartite structure of the Jamaican government is modelled on Westminster. There are also pointed, personal aspects to these shared histories, for many Jamaicans of the present day are descended from the Africans whom the British had

enslaved and trafficked across the Atlantic, their surnames often taken from the slaveholders who once 'owned' their ancestors. At the same time, many Britons have ancestors among those slaveholders, and Cameron's visit had brought one in particular to public attention. Sir James Duff was an army officer and MP who, as the trustee of a Jamaican estate, had received compensation for 202 enslaved people. Duff was also Cameron's first cousin six times removed.<sup>3</sup>

In the weeks and months before Cameron went to Jamaica, he had faced mounting calls to 'atone [and] apologise personally and on behalf of his country' for the horrors of colonial slavery. The Barbadian historian Sir Hilary Beckles asked him 'to acknowledge responsibility for your share of this situation and ... to contribute in a joint programme of rehabilitation and renewal'. Earlier that year the Jamaican Parliament had unanimously passed a motion which stated that the country was entitled to reparations for colonial slavery, and now Professor Verene Shepherd, the chair of Jamaica's National Commission on Reparations, declared that 'nothing short of an unambiguous apology' would suffice. Then, shortly after Cameron's plane touched down at Kingston, Portia Simpson-Miller raised the issues of slavery and reparatory justice during their bilateral talks. It followed that, on 30 September, when Cameron finally addressed the assembled dignitaries in the Jamaican Parliament, he would indeed speak of slavery and 'the long, dark shadow' that it cast over the Caribbean. But he did not say sorry.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, Cameron appeared to represent Britain as a fellow *victim* of slavery. Describing Britons and Jamaicans as 'friends who have gone through so much together since those darkest of times', he urged his audience to 'move on from this painful legacy and continue to build for the future'. And while Cameron allowed that slavery was 'abhorrent in all its forms' and without a 'place whatsoever in any civilised society', the traditional, triumphalist account of Britain's connection to colonial slavery shone through. 'Britain is proud', he told the descendants of the very people whom the British had enslaved, 'to have eventually led the way in its abolition.'<sup>5</sup>

The lack of apology should not have been surprising. On the day before Cameron's speech, Downing Street had defended the British government's stubborn refusal to discuss reparations. Slavery was 'centuries old', a spokesman said, and it happened 'under a different government'. It therefore remained official policy that 'the right

approach' did not encompass reparations. On the contrary, the 'right' approach appeared to involve spending £25 million on a new prison outside Kingston for the purpose of incarcerating Jamaican nationals who had been convicted of crimes in Britain. Downing Street promptly issued another press release: 'UK signs deal', ran the headline, 'to send Jamaican prisoners home'. Notably, all this occurred while Theresa May's Home Office was aggressively pursuing the deportation of *Windrush*-generation West Indians.<sup>6</sup>

In his 732-page memoir, *For the Record*, David Cameron found no space for his 2015 trip to Jamaica, or the issue of historical slavery more generally. However, the *abolition* of slavery had long been central to his ideas about Britishness. In a 2014 *Mail on Sunday* article on 'British Values' he had written: 'This is the country that helped ... abolish slavery'. Nine years previously, as the shadow Education Secretary, he had pressed for a policy of 'ensuring that all children are taught to be proud of Britain, our history and our values'. Among the 'proud achievements' in British history, he alighted on 'Britain's role in ending slavery', but there was no mention of Britain's prior role in developing and then exploiting colonial slavery and the slave trade.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, Cameron is not alone in perpetuating this brand of unthinking, self-congratulatory nationalism. The mythology of Britain as the champion of liberty and the enemy of slavery has a long-standing tradition, and abolition has figured as the triumph of British justice and morality since the early decades of the nineteenth century. The halcyon days of these beliefs were probably between the wars and, in 1935, the historian Reginald Coupland proclaimed that

[Abolition was] not after all a romantic illusion ... It may be that politics ... is often no more than a mask for the strife of rival interests, but the lives and work of Wilberforce and the [anti-slavery campaigners known as the] Saints are certain proof that not merely individuals but the common will, the State itself, can rise on occasion to the heights of pure unselfishness.

Somehow, the myth that Britain was really an *anti-slavery* nation survived the trauma of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s. Somehow, the myth also survived Britain's secret war in Oman in the late 1960s, when the Foreign Office turned a blind eye to the slavery

there that it rationalised as ‘the local equivalent of the welfare state’. By the time of the bicentennial anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007, the celebrations were described by the activist Toyin Agbetu, who interrupted a commemorative ceremony at Westminster Abbey, as a mere ‘Wilber-fest’. (Strangely, in December 2019, Boris Johnson’s government could not find the money for a bronze memorial to the *victims* of British slavery that was proposed for Hyde Park.)<sup>8</sup>

The idea that abolition was the triumph of British Christianity is equally commonplace. I grew up in the Northern Irish heartland of the Democratic Unionist Party and the intellectual culture of this staunchly conservative part of the United Kingdom was often informed by an unyielding, fundamentalist Christianity. When I was sixteen, one DUP councillor reacted to the midnight sale of a Harry Potter book with the words, ‘These cults with their stories about witches are damaging, especially to young people who would be better off saying their prayers’. Later that year, another DUP councillor declared that Hurricane Katrina had been sent by God to punish New Orleans for its gay-friendly Mardi Gras. In this world, it was assumed knowledge that Wilberforce and Britain’s Christians had ‘freed the slaves’. Yet as I searched the Bible for the verses that could explain how Christian faith alone had enabled Britain to sweep away slavery, I searched in vain.<sup>9</sup>

By the age of twenty-two, beguiled by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history, I secured funding for doctoral research into the Bible’s role in historical slavery. Really, I wanted to answer two questions. First, how and why do intelligent people defend the indefensible? The last five years of Anglo-American politics have been fascinating. Second, if abolishing slavery was a great achievement – and it *was* – then who and what were the necessarily ‘great’ obstacles in the way? While there is voluminous scholarship on slavery, there was a relative dearth of work about British *opposition* to abolition. But as my PhD expanded into a wider history of the British defence of slavery, I uncovered hundreds of pro-slavery documents that had been ‘forgotten’. Building on the work of historians such as Lowell J. Ragatz, Lillian Penson, Christer Petley, Nick Draper, David Lambert, Katie Donington, among others, this book is based in part upon that research.’<sup>10</sup>

These sources reveal a clear and troubling picture of widespread and fervent British support for colonial slavery and, although recent scholarship has demurred, I have no difficulty in describing their authors as 'pro-slavery', not as 'anti-abolitionist'. In truth, the choice over ending slavery was binary: Britons of the 1820s or 1830s could choose to preserve slavery or to abolish it; and by opposing abolition an MP, financier, or journalist in fact supported the persistence of slavery. Indeed, it is worth considering whether the equivocal person, who prefaced arguments against abolition with professions of hating slavery 'in the abstract', committed the more grievous offence: the person who defended slavery *on the merits of slavery* did something evil, but the person who defended slavery, despite knowing that slavery was wrong, did something even worse.<sup>11</sup>

The realities of British colonial slavery and abolition were strikingly different from the sweeping, sentimental accounts which prevail in the popular imagination. When Parliament abolished the British slave trade in 1807, it did *not* abolish colonial slavery; and when the last slave ship dropped anchor, more than 700,000 people remained in bondage in the British Caribbean. For these men, women, and children, the abolition of the trade made no difference whatsoever to their lives. They were still enslaved, and abolition did nothing to diminish the pain, cruelty, and violence that British slaveholders continued to inflict upon them. In fact, the campaign to abolish colonial slavery did not even *begin* for another sixteen years until, on a cold London night in January 1823, a few dozen committed radicals founded the Anti-Slavery Society. In the meantime, much of Latin America, the northern US states, and the free black republic of Haiti had already abolished slavery on their own terms: the idea that Britain was 'first' to do so is bogus nonsense.

The ensuing, belated campaign for slave emancipation was no mere coda to the campaign against the slave trade. It was waged by different people with different ideas against different enemies in a different context. Moreover, there was absolutely nothing inevitable about its success. When the anti-slavery campaigners made their first move, they were confronted by stupendously wealthy planters and merchants whose fortunes depended on the enslavement of Africans, by intellectuals and publishers who deplored the very idea of 'colonial reform', and by government ministers who dared not endanger the future of

colonies which had provided Britain with economic and strategic security for centuries. Together these men formed the West India Interest, the 'Interest' of this book's title, and rolled national politics as one of the most fearsome lobbies ever known to British history. Indeed, as these men corralled the national press, the City of London, and the Tory government of the day into the *pro-slavery* ranks, it became clear that the West India Interest did not simply have connections to the British establishment; it *was* the British establishment.

The fight to eradicate slavery – and to overturn widely held assumptions about the merits of it – is one of Britain's defining moral and political battles. This book tells that story. While there are some broadly thematic chapters and analytical sections, it is nonetheless framed as a narrative. If history is about anything, it is probably about 'how' and 'why'. And if one purpose of this book is to explain how and why Britain transformed itself from a slaveholding superpower into a supposedly 'anti-slavery nation', that story needs to be told in chronological order. To do otherwise and to write about slavery from the perspective of 'freedom' would risk entrenching the dangerous idea that the abolition of slavery was a *fait accompli*.

This has not been an easy book to write. For one thing, there is blood in these pages because the history of slavery cannot be told without it. To sanitise the story would not only understate the role that shocking imagery played in slavery-related materials; it would also – and less excusably – minimise the atrocities that the British perpetrated against millions of Africans over hundreds of years across oceans, islands, and continents. For another, there is terminology here that would be unforgivable if it were used today, but where historical figures have used racist language, I have reproduced it in full. This is not gratuitous. These *were* the terms of debate.

There is a further problem with sources. From the advent of the anti-slavery campaign in 1823, Britons wrote thousands of letters, articles, pamphlets, and books about slavery, but almost nobody did so from a position of neutrality. Almost everything which entered the public domain was crafted as propaganda, and the challenges for the historian are obvious. Nonetheless, this is the first narrative history of British colonial slavery which gives equal space to the *pro-slavery* figures who finished on the 'wrong side' of history. There are plenty of good reasons *not* to memorialise these people, but there is

every good reason to remember them: if we are to understand how and why Britain abolished slavery, we also need to understand how and why Britons fought to preserve it. I have also sought, where possible, to give expression to voices that are often excluded from histories of the early nineteenth century, principally those belonging to women and people of colour. I have not always succeeded, in the main because the historical record is skewed towards the educated white men who monopolised political and literary power at the time.

On that point, a note about myself. I am a white man who was born into a middle-class family. I went to a grammar school and then to Cambridge; I have taught at Cambridge and Oxford; and I now work in the corporate world. As such, some readers might think that I am exactly the wrong person to write a book about slavery, and perhaps there is some merit in that argument; indeed, if this were a book about the black experience of enslavement, it might not be 'my' story to tell. However, even if this book must and does include elements of that experience, that is not the history I have chosen to write; rather, this book is primarily a history of how white Britons have thought, written, and acted about slavery. To that end, it is worth remembering that just as slavery was always something *done to* people, it was also something *done by* people – and almost always, in the British case, by educated white men. It follows that this book, which narrates and seeks to explain that history of exploitation, necessarily focuses on those historical figures.

For the past two hundred years, the authors of Britain's 'national story' and the smiths of British 'national values' have placed *opposition* to slavery at the core of their constructions. I have never been persuaded. As this book will show, the British 'nation' was in fact deeply implicated in and violently supportive of colonial slavery. If this book achieves anything, I hope it encourages readers to interrogate the myths of British history, to question Britain's troubling role in the shaping of the modern world, and to think about what should happen next. Perhaps most relevantly, this book poses the question: Should criminals ever celebrate the end of their own criminality?

## *Introduction: Demerara, 1823*

The valuable Colony of Demerara is very imperfectly known to Europeans . . . Executing a work of this kind . . . requires an extent and variety of reading, and acquirements . . . and a patience of investigation, and soundness of judgment, which . . . are rarely to be found in the works of travellers. Indeed, these histories are, in general, very defective, and surprisingly inaccurate.<sup>1</sup>

Joshua Bryant, *Account of an Insurrection* (1824)

Shortly after dawn, between the hours of six and seven on Monday, 18 August 1823, Joseph Packwood raised the alarm. Waking his manager with the blast of a bugle, he reported a plot among the enslaved of Demerara. The plan had been fixed the night before at the Bethel Chapel and, that morning, across the fields and farmyards of the colony, they would rise to seize their freedom. Packwood's manager was John Simpson, the supervisor of the Reduit plantation and the captain of a local troop of cavalry. Simpson knew his duty. He rose, dressed, mounted his horse, and rode the five miles west to Georgetown, the capital of the colony. The governor needed to know. In the words of Joshua Bryant, a local artist who became the first historian of the Demerara Rebellion, this was 'a ramified Conspiracy, [a] formidable Insurrection', and 'a crisis, agitating and perilous beyond all previous example'.<sup>2</sup>

Stretching along the northern coast of South America, Demerara was the tropical frontier of the British Empire. Founded by the Dutch

in the 1740s and later captured by the French, the colony had 'become' British only in 1814, but these delta-lands had long inspired European dreams of lucre. In the 1590s, Sir Walter Raleigh had been commissioned to explore the region and, more sensationally, to find the mythical city of El Dorado, which supposedly lay on the upper reaches of the Orinoco River. Of course, that expedition failed: the quest for the Lost City of Gold was scuppered by yellow fever, dense jungle, and crocodile attacks, but also by the inconvenient fact that El Dorado did not exist. By the 1820s, however, Demerara was giving its name to the crisp, golden-brown sugar that grew in its fields, and the colony was famed for its fertility. Whereas the soils of older, smaller British colonies were tiring, the land in Demerara was fresh and rich. There was plenty of it, too: if the jungle, swamp, and savannah were cleared to the south, sugar could be grown deep into the continent. All this was a boon for the planters, but a curse upon the enslaved people who actually performed the work of draining swamps, cutting down trees, and planting cane. With heavy rain, stifling heat, and stagnant water making the colony a 'reaper's garden', death stalked every man and woman: every year, thousands died painfully from malaria, cholera, and dehydration.<sup>3</sup>

The promise of bountiful harvests drove Demeraran planters to unusual degrees of cruelty. One Christian missionary observed that they extracted 'a most immoderate quantity of work' from the enslaved, 'not excepting women far advanced in pregnancy'. The crack of the whip was the sound of plantation life and, 'from ½ past 6' in the morning 'until ½ past 9' at night, people's ears were 'pain'd' by it. The same missionary wondered whether the sins of this regime would 'awaken the vengeance of a merciful God' and, on that Monday in 1823, it seemed such wrath had come.<sup>4</sup>

By mid-morning, John Simpson had reached Georgetown. Built on the eastern bank of the Demerara River and once known to the Dutch as Stabroek, the colony's capital represented the idyll which had drawn so many Europeans to the Caribbean. As the historian Emilia Viotta da Costa has described, it was a place of white-painted wooden mansions in the shade of palm trees, imposing warehouses and wharves, verges of oleander and hibiscus that rustled in the breeze, and gardens of orange, lemon, and banana trees. On most days it was

a scene of bustling markets, handsome black carriages racing along red-dirt streets, and taverns dispensing liberal volumes of rum. When a white immigrant stepped off the ship after six weeks on board, the Demeraran capital must have looked like paradise. Yet when the drums beat to arms in 1823, Georgetown surrendered to a state of panic, 'to the miseries of war'. It was placed under martial law.<sup>5</sup>

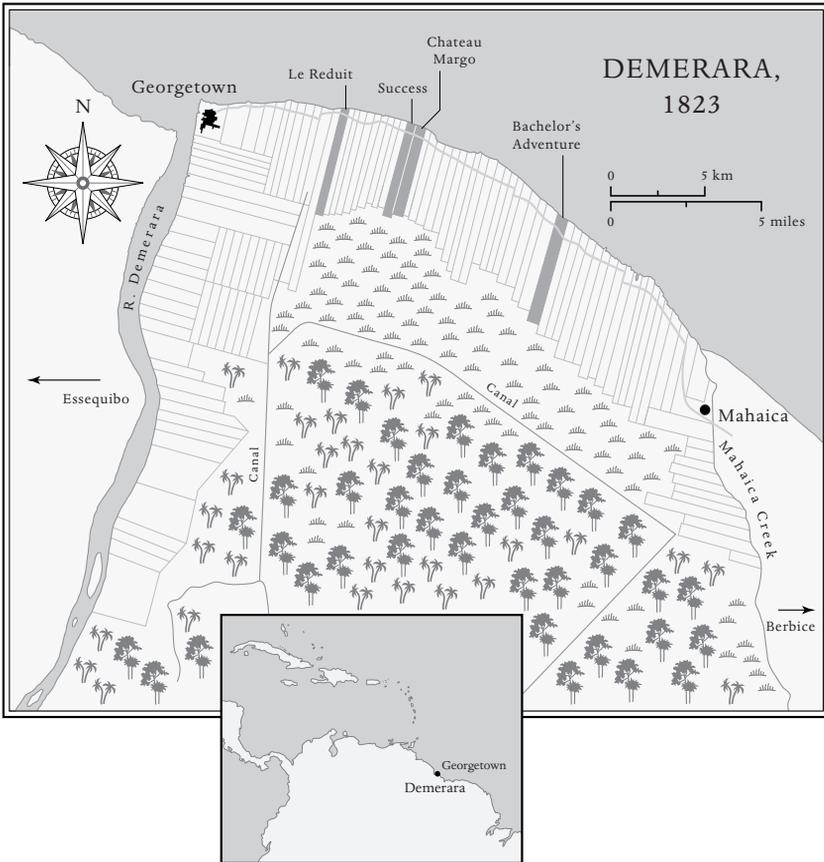
The long-serving governor of Demerara was the Irish-born soldier and slaveholder John Murray and, by early afternoon that Monday, he had made his plans. First, all those who had not rebelled would be confined to their houses. Second, all free 'Persons, without distinction, capable of bearing Arms, [were] required to enrol themselves in some Troop or Company of the Georgetown Brigade of Militia'. The Marine Battalion, composed of Georgetown's sailors, was placed under the command of a naval captain by the name of Muddle. Nearly six hundred men, many of them teenagers and tradesmen, came together in the Provisional Battalion; they took the Presbyterian church for their base and placed cannon on the roads leading into town. Georgetown also hosted barracks of professional soldiers, so Governor Murray ordered out the 21st North British Fusiliers and the 1st West India Regiment, both of whom readied for the fight. The ladies of the capital meanwhile hastened onto boats on the river, seeking sanctuary from 'scenes of horror too shocking to think on'. The rest of Georgetown fell into silence. 'All the stores were shut up', noted Bryant, and 'not a negro was to be seen on the streets ... If it had not been for the hurrying backwards and forwards of all classes to the guard-houses for arms, a solemn silence would have pervaded the whole capital – awful and impressive.'<sup>6</sup>

The reaction of the colonists was far from alarmist. In the Caribbean they feared nothing, not even a hurricane, more than a slave rebellion. Part of this was practised and pragmatic, for even mild unrest could cripple a colonial economy. The greater part of it, though, was primal and visceral, and colonial folk memory was filled with horrific tales of the violence done to planters during uprisings. There had been Tacky's War in Jamaica and the 1816 rebellion in Barbados, but in the colonial imagination the worst tales came from the French colony of Saint Domingue, present-day Haiti'. Spread over the western half of Hispaniola, Saint Domingue had once been

the most productive colony in the world: in the 1780s, it produced 30 per cent of the world's sugar and more than half of its coffee. Pitt the Younger even called it 'the Eden of the Western World', but the enslaved people of the colony did not share in his admiration: some French planters put tin muzzles on their slaves to stop them eating sugar cane; others encouraged 'slow punishments' that would 'make a greater impression'; and one French colonist crafted a party trick which involved placing an orange on a slave's head before inviting his guests to shoot at the fruit with a pistol.<sup>7</sup>

The French thus slept 'at the foot of Vesuvius' until 1791 when, at the signal of the Vodou priest Dutty Boukman, the slaves of Saint Domingue rebelled. The next thirteen years of the Haitian Revolution witnessed ferocious fighting between the rebels led by Toussaint Louverture, various French forces, and the British, who invaded on the grounds of 'security' but really in the hope of re-enslaving the rebels and seizing Saint Domingue for themselves. By 1804, when the free black republic of Haiti proclaimed its independence, stories of atrocity were legion. After one battle a French commander burned five hundred Haitian prisoners alive, while Napoleon's brother-in-law created the first known gas chamber by setting fire to barrels of sulphur in the holds of ships packed with Haitian prisoners. British colonists, however, remembered the deeds of the Haitian rebels: white carpenters had been sawn in half; French women were given a choice between forced marriage and death; and one member of the slave-catching militia was nailed to the gate of his plantation before his limbs were chopped off. The rivulets of Haitian towns ran red, and the assassin Jean Zombi became the eponymous inspiration for all 'zombies' thereafter.<sup>8</sup>

This was the kind of rebellion that the Demeraran colonists feared, but at first they did not know which kind of rebellion they faced. John Simpson's report had come from Le Reduit, just five miles from Georgetown, yet the colony stretched for thirty miles more to Mahaica Creek. This meant they knew nothing about dozens of plantations and thousands of potential rebels to the east. Nor was there any safe, reliable means of acquiring intelligence from the field. There was no telephone, no telegraph, and the estates along the shore were connected by roads and canals that, if seized by the



rebels, the British could not use. Only the sight of smoke could signal insurgency from afar: if the rebels refrained from arson, the rebellion could proceed undetected.

As Georgetown prepared for war, John Simpson was sent back into the countryside, riding with his cavalymen to Le Redit. En route he called at each plantation, urging the whites to secure their weaponry. By mid-afternoon, Simpson had been joined by Governor Murray, a handful of colonial officials, and a detachment of regular soldiers. At Le Redit, they set upon Joseph Packwood, the servant who had first alerted Simpson to the trouble: What more did he know? Under interrogation, Packwood gave up the names of two ringleaders

from the Vryheid estate, Mars and Cato, who in turn identified two men as the instigators of the whole uprising. Those men were Quamina and Jack, a father and son from the Success plantation owned by John Gladstone, the 'self-made Liverpool merchant prince' who had made and then grown a West Indian fortune despite never once visiting the colonies.

At the time of the insurrection, Quamina Gladstone – the surname had been imposed upon him – was in his mid-forties. Born on the Gold Coast and trafficked across the ocean before the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, he had been trained in woodwork, rising to the position of head carpenter at Success. As Emilia Viotta da Costa relates, he was also a 'well-behaved, trustworthy, and pious deacon' within the colony's Methodist congregation. Yet if Quamina was a dignified 'man of reason' and religion, his son was a 'man of passion' whose attention was drawn more to women than to books of prayer. A skilled artisan who worked as a cooper on the same plantation, Jack Gladstone was a striking figure. Described as 'handsome' and 'well made' and credited with a 'lively yet thoughtful countenance', he stood at six feet two inches, a remarkable height for any man in the 1820s, let alone for an enslaved person at the mercy of malnutrition.<sup>9</sup>

As they worked together at Success, the father and son shared a loving, close relationship – but also a deep and bitter hatred of the bondage they suffered. For the elder Gladstone, slavery was an affront to the Christian tenets of kindness and justice; for the younger, restless Gladstone, slavery was a cage. Yet beyond the cruelties inflicted daily upon all prisoners of the slave colonies, both men had more personal cause for grievance. In October 1822, Quamina had been forbidden from tending to his seriously ill wife, Peggy; forced instead to work a thirteen-hour shift, he came home only 'an hour after Peggy had breathed her last'. In the summer of 1823, when strange murmurings of freedom reached Demerara, no two men were more anxious to seize the moment. Assuming that Parliament had already abolished slavery, Quamina and Jack begged a missionary to 'fetch up the new Law' from Georgetown that they believed would set them free. When they were rebuked for foolish dreaming, they settled on a new approach.<sup>10</sup>

Before Governor Murray and his military party could apprehend Jack and Quamina, they spotted smoke in the distance. Success would have to wait. As the fire drew the soldiers east in the gloaming, they were ambushed by a band of rebels brandishing cutlasses. 'We have them!' cried the rebels. 'We have them!' Murray demanded their terms, and the reply was simple: 'Our rights', by which they meant the liberties that Parliament had supposedly conferred upon them. Murray refused to yield. He would not talk until the rebels laid down their arms. A few obliged and offered to negotiate, but their moderation was drowned out by the sound of conch-shells. In Demerara, these shells were used to signal the start and the end of the working day, but now they were the sirens of rebellion. The noise grew and grew until the soldiers intervened, firing their muskets into the sky and dispersing the rebels. This early skirmish established a pattern of cagey, almost reluctant fighting that would define the insurrection. On the one hand, the rebels knew they outnumbered the British, but they were outgunned: most of them carried only axes, cutlasses, or at best the unwieldy shotguns known as fowling-pieces. On the other hand, the British knew they had superior firepower but a numerical disadvantage. Moreover, they could not shoot too many rebels without endangering the future prosperity of the colony, and the militia would have to answer to the planters for the destruction of their 'property'.<sup>11</sup>

By the time that Murray and his men made camp for the night, estates all along the Demeraran coast had fallen to the rebels. At the Walrond estate of Nabaclis, the whites had grabbed what ammunition they could before taking refuge in the plantation house. Within ten minutes of barricading the doors, the rebel 'war-whoops', described by Joshua Bryant as 'a most dreadful yell', went up around the house's yard. Hiding upstairs, Mrs Walrond fell into 'the most acute distress from the noisy turbulence of the revoltors below'. When she leaned out of her bedroom window, she got shot in the arm. Downstairs in the hallway, the estate's overseer, Mr Tucker, took the fight to the rebels. He edged towards the front door of the house and shot through it, down into the yard. When the rebels fired back, they struck Tucker in the chest. His last words were to the point: 'O, Christ! I am shot!' With only Mr Walrond and one other man left fighting, the rebels

stormed the house. Dragged down the steps, Walrond begged for his life. 'Will you murder me in this barbarous manner?' he pleaded. His captors' mercy was unexpected. 'You are a good man,' he was told, and 'you love God'. All that Walrond suffered was the ignominy of the stocks, with his wounded wife shown similar clemency: 'We intend you no harm,' a rebel explained. 'We are only determined to have our freedom.'

Another siege was unfolding at Mon Repos, where the plantation manager and his men, taking cover behind the house's window-frames, engaged the rebels in a gunfight. At Bachelor's Adventure, the black bookkeeper, Mr Rogers, was woken in the night by insurgents demanding 'guns, powder, ball, [and] iron'. When Rogers refused, they beat down his door and took what they wanted; the next wave of rebels seized Rogers himself. These scenes were repeated on almost forty plantations from Plaisance, just four miles from Georgetown, along the coast to Clonbrook.

The morning after his encounter with the rebels, Governor Murray returned to Georgetown, leaving command in the field to Colonel John Thomas Leahy, a stern and ruthless veteran of the Napoleonic Wars. Camping at night and travelling by day, Leahy and his men pushed from west to east, trying to clear the road of rebels and to open a line from Georgetown to Mahaica. Progress was not straightforward: 'to impede the march of the military', the rebels had burned or broken the bridges that spanned the colony's canals and trenches. Where they could, the soldiers used timber from the sundered bridges and, in one case, from the roof of a plantation's turtle pool to jerry-rig new paths across the water. At each estate, the British strove to free the captured colonists, disarm the rebels, and return the land to white control. These 'liberating missions' led to wildly differing outcomes. At Success, the British were humiliated. When the rebels stepped out from the main house to encounter the redcoats, the cavalry panicked and fled. Some rode for a mile before pausing; some did not rest until they met with reinforcements; and others fell from their steeds into the canal that marked the plantation's boundary.

At Bachelor's Adventure, however, the British struck a decisive blow. This estate had become the effective headquarters of the

rebellion and, by the Wednesday, hundreds of insurgents had gathered on its grounds: as the military later reported, ‘an immense body of negroes had secreted themselves [there] . . . for the purpose of attacking us’. The British detachment which approached Bachelor’s Adventure was led by Leahy himself. Now moving at night, the troops took cover in the cane fields, but always close enough that pistol shot would reach the rebels. As day broke, Leahy revealed himself. Walking calmly towards the rebels with just a handful of men around him, the British colonel demanded their surrender. He was met with scorn and laughter: What could these few soldiers do? One of the insurgents proposed that they shoot Leahy and be done with him, but instead the rebels presented their demands: they would surrender *only* when granted three days’ holiday per week and the right to attend church each Sunday.

For British troops reared on outrageous stories of ‘slave atrocity’, this must have been stunning. Here, having inflicted precious little violence on the people and property of Demerara, and having heard rumours from London of proposals to reform slavery, the rebels were insisting simply upon the extension of their rights. They were not threatening to march upon Georgetown, to burn the crops, or to massacre the whites; they were not even demanding their immediate emancipation. Joseph Bryant would write about ‘lawless outrages’ and ‘dreadful rencontres’, but all that these rebels wanted was more time off work and permission to worship freely on the Sabbath.

Leahy was unmoved. In his eyes, the enemy were rebels against the Crown, and nothing could redeem them. Once more, he demanded their surrender and, as the rebels debated their choices, the rest of his troops looped round to outflank them. With his foes now trapped between the soldiers and the cane fields, Leahy ordered a volley of shots. Some of the insurgents fled into the fields, but most held their ground. One last chance for surrender was spurned and this was the cue for bloodshed. The British troops fired at will, cutting down hundreds and scattering the rest. Later reports put a gloss on the killing. ‘The Lieutenant-Colonel having in vain attempted to convince these deluded people of their error’, it was recorded, ‘and every attempt to induce them to lay down their arms having failed, he made his dispositions, charged the [slaves] . . . and dispersed

them with the loss of 100 to 150.' On the British side, just one rifleman was injured.

News of the rout travelled quickly by the back roads and dirt tracks and the rebels' spirit soon broke. By Friday morning, British soldiers were marching freely along the coast, 'liberating' the plantations and visiting 'justice' upon the subdued insurgents. It was at many places a tour of execution. A white flag was raised at Resouvenir but the conspirators were shot dead on the spot. At Drogerie, when two rebels wore pieces of white cloth as a sign of peace, they were tied to a cabbage tree and executed. At Clonbrook, when one rebel volunteered to give up Quamina and Jack, he was chastised by an elder called Beard, who said that he would rather die than betray his friends. Overheard by Colonel Leahy, Beard was given the chance to prove the courage of his convictions, and when his word held true, he too was killed. Back at the Walrond estate, the rebels Caleb and Sloane were held accountable for the murder of the overseer, Mr Tucker. Both were shot. Joseph, the driver on the estate, was forced to saw the heads off their corpses.

As the British military served its swift and brutal retribution in the fields, and as the planters of Demerara resumed control of their estates, a more formal vengeance was exacted in the government buildings of Georgetown. Eight days after the rebellion had broken out, the courts-martial began. Their president was Stephen Goodman, the commander of the Georgetown Militia, and Goodman's aide-de-camp acted as the court's interpreter, translating the charges, questions, and evidence into 'the negro dialect' for the benefit of the accused; in turn, the aide-de-camp interpreted the rebels' evidence for the prosecution, the judges, and the public gallery. One might wonder how much was lost, and lost deliberately, in translation. The first two defendants were called Natty and Louis; inevitably, they were the first to be convicted. At five o'clock on the day of their hearing, they were marched through Georgetown to the rhythm of a dead march played by a military band. There was not time to construct the gallows, so Natty and Louis were shot.

Joshua Bryant's history of the insurrection records that over seventy rebels were tried by the Georgetown courts-martial. Only one, Dick, was acquitted. Ten were hanged then decapitated, their heads fixed

on spikes as a deterrent to many of the older Africans who believed they could not be 're-born' in their homeland if their bodies were not whole. A handful more rebels had their sentences respited and one of them, Trim, was pardoned because he informed on a friend. The courts might have considered this justice, but it was more likely a calculated decision: the execution of all seventy men would have dealt a significant economic blow to the planters. Moreover, sending back the conspirators, scarred and broken, would impress the fate prescribed to traitors upon the minds of would-be rebels. Some of them were given months in solitary confinement, but the common penalty was whipping. In the British army, 175 lashes were known to put a strong man in hospital for weeks; one rebel in Demerara received 1,000 lashes.

Yet as many insurgents were rounded up, Jack and Quamina remained at large. They were thought to have fled into the jungle to the south of the plantations and, for two reasons, the need to capture them was acute. First, if they remained free, the pair would be a symbol of hidden hope for those who remained in slavery. Second, if they could endure in the swamps and savannah, there beckoned months and maybe years of guerrilla-style attacks on the colony. Decades of combat against the free Maroons of Jamaica were a stark reminder of this problem.

Governor Murray now placed a thousand-guilder bounty on the heads of Jack and Quamina, but the British would look for them too. The next Friday, eleven days after the rebellion had broken out, a hunting party mustered at dawn by the back-dam of the Lusignan estate. Marching along the canal trenches, a detachment of militiamen led by two redcoat officers and a posse of Indian guides drove deep into the South American wilderness. The expedition met with calamity. The British had taken only small rations of pork and biscuit with them and, wading through waist-high waters that were festering in the late summer heat, they were abandoned by their guides. Lost, exhausted, and defeated by the land, the soldiers turned back and retreated to Georgetown. Thus ended, wrote Joshua Bryant, 'the most harassing and dreary march'.

By the first Saturday in September, the British had readied another mission. At five o'clock that afternoon, with new Indian guides and

better supplies, they were ready to depart from the military post at Felicity. Yet now, by chance, an enslaved man called Frank approached the soldiers. Tempted by the thousand-guilder bounty, he offered intelligence that Jack Gladstone was hiding with his wife Susannah at the Chateau Margo estate. Reconnaissance proved the truth of Frank's report and, at one o'clock the next morning, the British crept onto the plantation. For hours they waited in the darkness, encircling the house where Jack Gladstone slept. At last, at half past five, they moved: Jack was found sleeping on the floor, and Susannah on the roof.

Quamina, however, was nowhere to be seen; by lunchtime, the bush expedition had readied again. Scouring the backs of the plantations, the soldiers came upon clusters of crude sheds that the fugitives had built and then abandoned. The soldiers passed another week in failure and stress, suffering the 'grievous hardships and fatigues [that were] necessarily inflicted upon all who range those wild forests'. Their only break came on the next Saturday, when fresh intelligence revived their hunt and a newly captured fugitive offered up Quamina's location in exchange for his life. Now, the chase began in earnest. The British soon caught sight of the rebel leader, but this did not mean they could catch him: Quamina knew the country better than the British, and he was faster. Indeed, he was on the verge of disappearing into the bush, perhaps for ever, when the Indian scout Skillikelly took aim: Quamina was shot in the temple and the torso, and he was killed. But death alone did not satisfy the British soldiers. They dragged Quamina's body back to the coast, erected a gibbet, and strung up his corpse, leaving it to rot in the late summer heat. A local merchant later noted that a 'colony of wasps . . . built a nest in the cavity of the stomach and were flying in and out of the jaws which hung frightfully open'. The defilement of Quamina's body was an ultimate declaration: the rebellion was over.<sup>12</sup>

For some British observers, the rebellion had brought Demerara to the brink of destruction. Although the rebels had by and large refrained from maiming or killing the whites, and although it was only plantation buildings with symbolic importance that bore 'the lamentable marks of the destructive fury of savage dissipation', one colonist wrote to the *Morning Chronicle*, a leading London newspaper, that 'it was

only divine Providence that saved us. A few more hours and Demerara would have been a second St Domingo'. Yet with the supposed guidance of the Almighty to thank, the colonists had restored what they saw as the 'proper' way of things. In three weeks, the rebellion had been quashed, its leaders killed or convicted, and the colony returned to peace.<sup>13</sup>

It would be a fleeting victory. The colonists could not have known it at the time, but the Demerara Rebellion of 1823 was a critical milestone in the history and downfall of slavery in the British Empire. Over the previous decades, the chains which bound the enslaved had been rattling across the Atlantic world. As the Latin American revolutionary Simón Bolívar and the *libertadores* carved new republics out of the crumbling Spanish Empire, they damned slavery as 'the daughter of darkness' and decreed that children born to enslaved women would live free. In the United States, most northern states had already abolished slavery within their own borders and the Compromise of 1820 had brokered a constitutional truce by creating the free state of Maine as a counterweight to the new slave state of Missouri, although the intractable problem of American slavery was given violent expression two years later by Denmark Vesey's thwarted rebellion in South Carolina. All the while, notwithstanding its own internal crises, the free black nation of Haiti figured as a beguiling, provocative example of self-liberation.<sup>14</sup>

It was in this context of growing tension, seven months before the outbreak of the Demerara Rebellion, that the humanitarian campaigners who had secured the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 regrouped to form the Anti-Slavery Society. In May 1823, their parliamentary leader, Thomas Fowell Buxton, had proposed the reform and the gradual eradication of colonial slavery. Whispered, half-accurate reports of those proposals and the Demeraran planters' supposed refusal to enact them had been the source of the rebels' demands for their 'rights'. Over the following decade slavery became the defining moral issue in British public life. At public lectures attended by thousands, in newspapers and magazines, in the City and Parliament, in universities and churches, and in royal palaces too, the supposed rights and wrongs of slavery would be debated with a ferocity that split political parties, communities, and families. On one side, the Anti-Slavery Society argued

for emancipation. On the other, the powerful West India Interest – backed by leading politicians, publishers, and intellectuals – insisted on the preservation of colonial slavery. This is the story of that decade: of conspiracy, espionage, rebels, and radicals; intrigue and backdoor deals; upheaval in politics, religion, and society; and the ultimate victory of radical campaigners and Caribbean rebels over the might of the British establishment.