

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-48659-0 - West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807

David Beck Ryden

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## I

## Producing a Peculiar Commodity

On the eve of the American Revolution, it was difficult for British subjects to foresee the problems that would beset the West Indian planter class during the coming half-century. From the vantage point of Britain's port cities, the North American colonies, or the Caribbean islands, the sugar industry was considered to be the source of fantastic personal wealth, substantial tax revenues, and national pride. Although other tropical export staples were pursued – such as cotton, ginger, and coffee – it was slave-grown sugar that generated this perception, which remained fixed in the imaginations of every-day Britons and colonial policy makers. Thus, few recognized how quickly the British West Indian economy could become unhinged and even fewer predicted the social changes in Britain that would give birth to widespread criticism of slavery. This attack would first undermine the British Atlantic slave trade with “abolition” (1807) and, much later, would free the Empire's slaves with “emancipation” (1834).

The fact that sugar generated huge fortunes – and fueled a massive network of trade that touched three continents – can account for the commonly held belief that the West Indies built Britain's Atlantic economy. This assessment was amplified by uncoordinated efforts to trumpet the virtues of the sugar business. Individual island assemblies, their paid agents in London, and various merchant groups found it necessary, from time-to-time, to put their industry's case forward, urging both economic and military protection. For much of the eighteenth century, planters and their merchant allies focused on the general threat of foreign competition posed by the French, who were not only Britain's primary military rival

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-48659-0 - West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807

David Beck Ryden

Excerpt

[More information](#)

but also the most efficient producer of sugar in the Americas.<sup>1</sup> Soon after the Seven Years' War, British planters were effectively squeezed out of European markets by the sugar growers in St. Domingue (Haiti) and other French islands. In fact, British planters during this time were dependent on mercantilist trade laws that protected their home markets from low-cost foreign competition. Britons did pay higher sugar prices relative to those paid on the Continent, but a stream of pamphlets and books justified the burden of pro-British sugar policies. By stressing the key role that these tiny islands played in the Empire, the pro-West India literature helped secure the government's favor.

The image reproduced in Figure 1.1 is perhaps the most succinct, though subtle, depiction of the pro-sugar argument offered by the Caribbean interest in the eighteenth century. As part of a larger cartouche accompanying Thomas Craskell and James Simpson's 1763 map of eastern Jamaica, the image is in fact a diagram of colonial trade and social relations.<sup>2</sup> Though this view may be a highly stylized depiction of Kingston harbor, it is likely that it is actually a composite, fictional interpretation of the activity visiting a typical Jamaican or Caribbean port. Within this picture, the unknown artist successfully merged two important messages, simultaneously emphasizing the strategic and economic importance of the region while softening the harsh realities of sugar production.

Looking closely, one can see that under an idyllic Caribbean sky filled with puffy, cumulous clouds, there is a single gunboat on the left-hand side, quietly protecting and monitoring a scene of hurried industry. While this military presence underscores the strategic importance of the sugar islands, the fact that this lone warship is far outnumbered by merchant vessels signifies that the private profits far outweigh the public's defense expenditures. At a point in time when American colonial policy was facing close scrutiny (1763), it was essential to persuade government leaders that the sugar colonies offered good value for money. By defending the islands, the Royal Navy was protecting an important source of British capital and British property at a very minimal expense.

<sup>1</sup> For example, see John Ashley, *Memoirs and Considerations Concerning the Trade and Revenues of the British Colonies in America* (London: C. Corbett, 1740); Anon., *Reasons Grounded on Facts* (London: M. Cooper, 1748); Anon., *Considerations which May Tend to Promote the Settlement of our New West-India Colonies* (London: James Robson, 1764).

<sup>2</sup> Copies of this map and accompanying cartouche can be found among the Lord Shelburne papers at the Clements Library and the Colonial Office records at the NA. Thos. Craskell and Jas. Simpson, *This Map of the County of Surr[e]y in the Island of Jamaica* (Fournier: London, 1763).



FIGURE 1.1 A Scene of West Indian Industry (1763)

Source: Thos. Craskell's "Map of the County of Surr[e]ly in the Island of Jamaica." Reprinted by permission from the William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

What is perhaps more obvious than these public costs and private benefits represented by the sailing ships is the industriousness revealed by the scene. White sailors, dockside workers, and wharfingers fill the background, diligently ferrying sub-refined sugar, rum, molasses, and provisions overland and across the harbor in small skiffs. This work is

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-48659-0 - West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807

David Beck Ryden

Excerpt

[More information](#)

exclusively male and clearly demands physical effort, with laborers shown with bent backs as they lift heavy loads, roll large casks, and pole their small boats into deep water. The most conspicuous individuals in the scene, however, are the two men in the right foreground. Both, dressed in breeches and tri-cornered hats, appear to be of high standing: the “gentleman” wearing an overcoat and carrying a walking stick is certainly a planter, while the other is possibly a merchant or a merchant’s agent. At their feet one sees the sources of the entire scene’s activity: puncheons of rum and a hogshead of sugar. The artist suggests that the exchange between these men is serious, legitimate business, having taken great care to frame within the doorway an “open” account book penned in ink, sitting on a fine cabriole-legged desk.

In stark contrast to the smooth and level shoreline is the representation of the interior of Jamaica. Although rough, the soil is dark and fertile, as demonstrated by the enormous tree dominating the left-hand side of the picture. Almost hidden beneath this towering plant is a kneeling, but strikingly healthy and muscular slave who is presenting a bag likely to contain coffee and bundles of tropical lumber harvested from Jamaica’s hinterland.<sup>3</sup> One sees that his strength is unmatched by the tiny Europeans peopling the harbor, thus repeating the nascent pro-slavery lie that kneeling Africans were subservient<sup>4</sup> and biologically ordained to do the hard work in the cane fields. This carefully arranged scene plainly shows the fruits-of-labor and the laborers, but not the *laboring* involved in production, thus visually encapsulating the most prominent contradictions in late-eighteenth-century colonial discourse.<sup>5</sup> Even before the

<sup>3</sup> If these are indeed bundles of boards, they represent the output of a declining industry. In the eighteenth century, plantation building on Jamaica had stripped much of the easy-to-reach trees. Nonetheless, there were sufficient mahogany exports so that unscrupulous merchants could pass off inferior Honduran mahogany as Jamaican grown. During the middle of the century, 510,000 feet of mahogany was annually exported from Jamaica. See Jennifer Anderson, “Nature’s Currency: The Atlantic Mahogany Trade and the Commodification of Nature in the Eighteenth Century,” *Early American Studies* 2 (2004), 64, 67.

<sup>4</sup> David Lambert explains that the Afro-Caribbean is portrayed as subservient even in abolitionist imagery, such as in the famous “am I not a man and a brother” medallion. See his *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity during the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth A. Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716–1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 54, 58. Bohls elaborates on Jamaican elite’s “fashionable theory and practice of landscape aesthetics . . . as a powerful discursive marker of both class and gender” in her essay, “The Gentleman Planter and the Metropole: Long’s *History of Jamaica*,” in *The Country and the City Revisited: England*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-48659-0 - West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807

David Beck Ryden

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Producing a Peculiar Commodity*

5

abolitionist attack, planters and their allies worked to construct a myth that downplayed the horrors of slavery, while heralding the riches that could be mined from a lush and bountiful land.

In total, Craskell's cartouche depicts how sugar planters and merchants orchestrated a massive, Atlantic-wide web of trade. Without the production of this crop, the port would be empty, with few or no European improvements to the shoreline. Without sugar, the Royal Navy would not be present. Without sugar, the two "gentlemen" posed in front of a European-styled, shingled merchant house would certainly not be in view. And finally, without sugar there would be a much smaller market for the forced migration of over two million Africans to the British Caribbean.<sup>6</sup> Although the British West Indian colonies were remote, they – like the wharf's treadmill crane – are depicted as providing enormous economic leverage to the Empire.

The story pictured in this engraving was frequently retold in letters, pamphlets, books, and articles penned by West India planters and their merchant supporters. From the perspective of this coalition, military and financial support could be best secured by stressing the economic role sugar played in the imperial-mercantile machine. Although there was clearly a disconnect between the harsh reality of slave life and the riches generated by their work, the West India literature of the pre-Revolutionary period did not engage in an explicit defense of slavery because, at that time, antislavery sentiment was not sufficiently loud to warrant a strong response. Consequently, the planter class and their allies produced a self-aggrandizing literature designed to encourage the cultivation and the maintenance of the government's good will. Like the artwork in Figure 1.1 suggests, West India writers argued that there was a symbiotic relationship between Britain and her Caribbean possessions, where one could not survive without the other.

Those connected to the sugar industry also used their direct political power to influence imperial policy to their advantage. Beginning with the Navigation Act of 1651, merchants lobbied government to impose trade restrictions that were initially designed to keep the Dutch from participating in England's colonial commerce. This law marked the beginning of

*and the Politics of Culture: 1550–1850*, eds. Gerald Maclean et al., 180–96, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Nearly one quarter of all slaves brought to the Americas were destined to the British West Indies. David Eltis estimates that the total number of slaves carried to this region exceeded 2.3 million in his "The Volume and Structure of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd Series, 58 (2001), 45.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-48659-0 - West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807

David Beck Ryden

Excerpt

[More information](#)

British mercantile protectionism and was followed by a series of complementary laws that insulated colonial planters from foreign competition in the English markets.<sup>7</sup> While sugar planters were restricted to English merchants to deliver their sugar to England, they benefited enormously from the effective exclusion of Portuguese, French, and Dutch sugars from the growing British market: prohibitive duties were attached to “foreign” tropical staples. Complementing this command over British consumer market, Parliament attempted to promote the export of British sugar to the Continent by offering subsidies in the form of drawbacks, which refunded either all or a part of the duties initially charged on import into Britain.<sup>8</sup> This insulation from British taxes was designed to give British planters the best possible opportunity to compete in European markets with the hope of promoting a positive balance of trade with foreign nations: the greater the value of British exports relative to imports, the more bullion would flow into the economy, thus making the nation supposedly wealthier. To this end, Parliament also offered cash bounties on the export of refined sugars that were shipped across the channel and the North Sea. Government assistance was further widened during the early eighteenth century, when West India lobbyists pressured Parliament to end the trade between North American merchants and French sugar planters by levying steep taxes on foreign molasses, rum, and sugar. This buy-British campaign succeeded with the passage of the Molasses Act of 1733, which not only offered another protected market to Caribbean planters but also intended to dampen French planter access to an important trade in provisions and supplies.

While there were some problems with smuggling during the eighteenth century, the letter of the Navigation Acts and protectionist duties worked to encourage the economic advancement of the Caribbean islands. Planters and merchants could stand by imperial policy, because it clearly served their industry. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, both the West Indian and the governmental commitment to classical mercantilism and the Navigation Acts were seriously undermined by (1) the loss of the American colonies; (2) the ambiguous imperial status of East India sugar; (3) the ideas of Adam Smith; (4) the antislavery sentiment among

<sup>7</sup> Russell R. Menard, “Plantation Empire: How Sugar and Tobacco Planters Built Their Industries and Raised an Empire,” *Agricultural History* 81 (2008), 312; Russell R. Menard, *Sweet Negotiations: Sugar, Slavery, and Plantation Agriculture in Early Barbados* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 68.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph Davis, “The Rise of Protection in England, 1689–1786,” *Economic History Review* New Series, 19 (1966), 312.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-48659-0 - West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807

David Beck Ryden

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Producing a Peculiar Commodity*

7

Britons; and (5) the new planter dependence on foreign markets. This new political and economic environment meant that the marriage between orthodox mercantilism and the self-interest of planters had become increasingly strained, making the pleas for special favor an increasingly complex task for West India colonists. Elite planters living in London were particularly conscious of the widening gulf between their self-interest and the traditional tenets of mercantilism. As a result, the planters— and a dedicated group of London merchants who had strong business ties to the West Indies – recognized that constant pressure on the government was required in order to maintain the privileged position that they, or their ancestors, had secured. While there were a number of West India organizations in Great Britain in the eighteenth century, it was the “Society of West India Planters and Merchants” (the *Society*)<sup>9</sup> that became the mouthpiece of the Caribbean colonies after the Revolutionary War. This business lobby was extremely well organized, holding regular meetings that sometimes attracted hundreds of supporters, particularly when it came to defending the sugar economy from the abolitionist attacks. What is striking about these defenders of the trade in Africans was their conviction that the abolition movement was part of a conspiracy designed to undermine the “old colonial system.” From the planters’ perspective, then, the possible abolition of the British slave trade was not simply a threat to their labor supply, but, a challenge to their entire political and economic philosophy.

#### HISTORIANS’ VIEWS ON THE WEST INDIAN ECONOMY AND ABOLITION

The intersection between economy, politics, and the abolition of the British slave trade has created one of the longest and most complex debates in modern historiography. The first scholars to consider seriously

<sup>9</sup> The “Society of West India Planters and Merchants” and its sister organization the “Society of West India Merchants” came to be known as the “Committee of West India Planters and Merchants” or the “West India Committee” during the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century, subcommittees, such as the West India Docks subcommittee, were also referred to as “Committee[s] of the West India Planters and Merchants.” For simplicity, historians have moved toward a convention of the nineteenth-century title, “the West India Committee,” even when referring to the “Society of West India Planters and Merchants” of the eighteenth century. This shorthand is slightly anachronistic because contemporaries called a parliamentary investigative body the “West-India Committee.” I therefore have adopted a new convention that abbreviates the “Society of West India Planters and Merchants” as the “*Society*” in hope of avoiding confusion.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-48659-0 - West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807

David Beck Ryden

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the significance of the West Indies to the Empire were economic historians, who argued that sugar investors enjoyed a growing home demand while securing economically favorable trade laws during the century before the American Revolution. One eighteenth-century observer argued that the earliest British sugar planters enjoyed the greatest prosperity, dubbing the seventeenth century a “golden age.”<sup>10</sup> This label was subsequently adopted by a number of twentieth-century historians who claimed that sugar profits steadily ebbed from high levels in the seventeenth century toward modest levels by the late eighteenth century. Richard Pares, for example, dubbed the period immediately preceding the American Revolution the “silver age” of sugar,<sup>11</sup> while historians who went beyond 1783 saw American independence as the beginning of a bronze or even lead age for British planters. The supposed bad times, for a handful of economic historians, were directly tied to the fact that the Revolution irreparably tore apart the traditional trade networks that had been built on the Navigation Acts: the very same mercantilist tradition that had required the North Americans to trade with the British Caribbean now imposed serious restrictions on this postwar “foreign” trade. With vigorous enforcement of the Navigation Acts immediately following American independence, British West India planters were denied (1) cheap plantation provisions; (2) an efficient American merchant fleet; and (3) a vent for Caribbean molasses. Today, no historian disputes the fact that the Revolution affected planter profits – for thousands of slaves literally starved as a result of the cessation of North American trade<sup>12</sup> – but there is no consensus with regard to the long-run effect American independence might have had on the West Indian economy.

Three-quarters of a century ago, the historian Lowell Ragatz made a compelling argument that the planter class was in “decline” after the Seven Years’ War. Consistent with Marxist thought, Ragatz’s narrative

<sup>10</sup> S.O.S. Senhouse, January 1, 1779, “Memoirs Commencing in Barbados” Memoirs of S.O.S. Senhouse, vol. 3, fo. 36. Microfilm No. JAC 219, Sterling Library, Yale University (Originals at Cumbria County Council Archives Department).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Pares identifies the period between 1763 and 1775 as the “silver age” of sugar and the “golden age” during the earliest days of English sugar planting. See Richard Pares, *Merchants and Planters* (Cambridge: Published for the Economic History Review at the University Press, 1960), 40; Richard Sheridan, *The Development of the Plantations to 1750: An Era of West Indian Prosperity, 1750–1775*. (Aylesbury, England: Ginn and Company, 1987 [1970]), 74, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Sheridan, “The Crisis of Slave Subsistence in the British West Indies during and after the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd Series, 33 (1976), 615–41.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-48659-0 - West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807

David Beck Ryden

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Producing a Peculiar Commodity*

9

outlined how slavery bred inherently poor plantation-business practices. For example, instead of conserving soil and seeking out new techniques and technologies, the “planter class” was described as backward looking and prone to overproduce to the detriment of their slaves and their own pocketbook. The natural tendency toward overproduction was exacerbated by Britain’s acquisition of the Ceded Islands at the Peace of Paris (1763). The addition of Grenada and the Grenadines, St. Vincent, and Tobago to Britain’s Caribbean empire meant that significantly more sugar flowed into the British marketplace. The sugar barons from the older islands, according to this account, were economically unprepared, having grown soft under the protectionist umbrella of the Navigation Acts. The American Revolution, according to Ragatz, only compounded the problems relating to the supposed poor husbandry of Britain’s slave holding colonists.<sup>13</sup>

Ragatz’s position may have remained uncontroversial and perhaps forgotten if it had not been for the larger narrative built on it by the Trinidadian historian, Eric Williams. Just over sixty years ago his seminal work, *Capitalism and Slavery*, made the connection between the economic decline of the British Caribbean and the decision to abolish the slave trade. What Williams did was to make the decline thesis relevant to a much wider audience, by staking the claim that economic degradation was linked to the grand unfolding of a commercial empire built on slavery. Sugar and slavery had, for the first 130 years, generated extraordinary profits, which Williams claimed had been regularly ploughed back into the British domestic economy. Similar to the planters’ own rhetoric, Williams argued that this capital formation targeted the manufacturing sectors that ushered in Britain’s Industrial Revolution. Williams also concurred with the planters in suggesting that the very same manufacturers who enjoyed cheap credit from slavery’s surplus profits were able to dip from the British colonial system a second time, because both African slave traders and the Caribbean planters were customers for their manufactured goods. For over a hundred years, as Williams’ interpretation goes, a sugar-based network of colonial trade fueled British manufacturing; Williams, like the planters, argued that the islands were vital to the development of Britain’s national wealth.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Lowell Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class* (New York: Octagon Books, 1963 [1928]), 111–203.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1994 [1944]), 51–107.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-48659-0 - West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807

David Beck Ryden

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Having centered the Caribbean in British imperial history, if not world history,<sup>15</sup> Williams then incorporated Ragatz's decline narrative to explain how sugar and slavery were increasingly viewed as unimportant to national wealth. Williams, like Ragatz before him, claimed that planters were caught in a cycle of debt and overproduction following the American Revolution.<sup>16</sup> Because of this decline, the slave colonies not only failed to produce surplus capital, but they actually began to drain capital from the home country by the late eighteenth century. This image of the Caribbean as an economic anchor, holding down the captains of British manufacturing, was buttressed by the emerging belief that the slave system was retrograde in comparison to the enormous productivity gains that were emerging in Britain's industrial sector. The publication of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) gave ammunition to those who championed a free labor ideology while at the same time it provided a counterpoint to the mercantilist position on overseas trade.<sup>17</sup> Smith argued that the protectionism offered by the Navigation Acts did not necessarily produce genuine net wealth for the nation, rather it produced riches for special interests.

The parliamentary offensive against the slave trade, Williams wrote, was part of this broader attack against the sugar producers and the mercantilist policy that had long supported the industry. For Williams, the humanitarian sentiment of antislavery was of little importance, because policy makers were merely moved by the material needs of the country. Although Williams' argument was attacked soon after the publication of *Capitalism and Slavery*,<sup>18</sup> a full-length indictment of his position did not appear until the early 1970s. Roger Anstey's detailed study of abolition revived the pre-Williams argument that credited the perseverance and skill of the leaders of the antislavery movement. Although he conceded that overproduction of sugar may have been a factor in the 1806 parliamentary debates over the *foreign* slave trade bill, Anstey attributed the ultimate

<sup>15</sup> Russell R. Menard "Reckoning with Williams: Capitalism and Slavery and the Reconstruction of Early American History," *Callaloo* 20 (1997), 793; Gerald Bosch, "Eric Williams and the Moral Rhetoric of Dependency Theory," *Callaloo* 20 (1998), 817, 822–5.

<sup>16</sup> Williams claimed that the slave system encouraged overly intensive agricultural practices. He argued that the "law of slave production" mandated that planters would destroy their own interest, in the long run. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 113.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 107.

<sup>18</sup> George R. Mellor, *British Imperial Trusteeship, 1783–1850* (London, Faber and Faber Ltd, [1951]), 39, 50–1, 55–7, 118–20.