

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87626-1 - Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World, 1780-1870

Tim Watson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: realism and romance in the nineteenth-century Caribbean

In the 5 December 1863 number of the *Illustrated London News*, the paper's book reviewer hailed the appearance of two new volumes of James Anthony Froude's multivolume *History of England*. Greeting with 'delight' Froude's writings on the reign of Elizabeth I, the reviewer intuited the feelings of the newspaper's readers: 'Of novels, sensational and unsensational, they must have had enough, and more than enough; and they will find it refreshing to turn for a while from fiction to fact, from fancy to history.'¹ Turning from the fanciful world of novels to the sturdier rewards of 'fact', the reviewer encouraged his readers to participate in a progressive narrative of history as an unfolding of British civilisation, an historicism that understands the present as the inevitable and verifiable outcome of past events that refuse to be consigned to the past:

[In the second volume] will be read an account of the first slaving voyage of John Hawkins, to which may be traced back through three centuries of spreading Christianity, of advancing civilisation, and of African slavery, during which the negro has not ceased to be deprived of that personal liberty which is his birthright, the rending asunder, at any rate for a time, of a mighty Republic.²

The contemporary civil war in the United States is imagined as a kind of bloody romance – 'the rending asunder . . . of a mighty Republic' – while Britain, by contrast, is the subject of history in its realist mode, in which the abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean, the affirmation of the right to 'personal liberty' for all, becomes the hallmark of British enlightenment and world leadership, the cornerstone of an imperial edifice built on 300 years of 'spreading Christianity' and 'advancing civilisation'. Here is a typical British post-emancipation position: to understand and write the Caribbean under the signs of realism, historicism, and humanitarianism, and to see the abolition of slavery as an index of the righteousness of British imperial policy even as other, presumably less civilised nations continue to deprive 'the negro' of liberty. One of the goals of *Caribbean Culture*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87626-1 - Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World, 1780-1870

Tim Watson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and British Fiction in the Atlantic World is to trace the way in which the British colonies in the West Indies came to occupy such a powerful place in the British historical imagination by the 1860s even as they moved to the periphery of geopolitical and economic circuits in the Atlantic and imperial worlds of the nineteenth century.

Of course, nineteenth-century understandings of Caribbean culture, of slavery, and of history were anything but monolithic, and it is the tensions and switchbacks between these different accounts of the nineteenth-century Caribbean that form the subject matter of this book. If, on the one hand, the ending of slavery could function as a mark of British moral uprightness, this coexisted with a view of slave societies as places of romantic simplicity that allowed many in Britain to support the Confederate forces against the army of the North during the US Civil War. The front cover of the same issue of the *Illustrated London News* depicts a heroic Confederate soldier waving his hat to encourage his comrades attacking a Union supply line; his romantic heroism is answered by the sublime grandeur of the cliffs and rocks that dwarf the northern forces.³ And on the page facing the review of Froude's history of England, the newspaper's editors explain the origin and significance of a striking image elsewhere in that issue,

in which the owner of a cotton plantation, South Carolina, is, with his wife and children, engaged in Divine worship, surrounded by his slaves, in a state of almost patriarchal simplicity. In the character of the negro as developed in the Slave States of America the two most marked features are his capacity for strong attachment and fidelity to his master when kindly treated and his susceptibility to religious influences.⁴

The illustration is entitled 'Family Worship in a Plantation in South Carolina'; it is also the cover illustration for this book.⁵

Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World tracks and analyses the shift from realism to romance and back again in writing about the West Indies in the nineteenth century. Caribbean societies and economies that had been dominated by plantation slavery were transformed into cultures where, by the mid-1860s, the smallholders and minor merchants who were the descendants of the enslaved had become forces to be reckoned with, sufficient to challenge the British assumption that plantation slaves would become plantation wage labourers and to make some wax nostalgic for the days before emancipation. Such nostalgia lies behind the appeal of 'Family Worship in a Plantation in South Carolina', in which the white patriarch and his white 'family' are 'surrounded by his slaves', a contemporary American scene that functions as a kind of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87626-1 - Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World, 1780-1870

Tim Watson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: realism and romance*

3

counterfactual Caribbean history. What if emancipation had not happened in the British empire? Would 'patriarchal simplicity' have reigned in the Caribbean too, just as it apparently did in the cotton fields of South Carolina, the southern territory most closely linked to the British West Indian colonies?⁶

However, the documentary appeal of the illustration is actually an illusion, as we can glean from the editorial note that accompanies it. 'The Illustration bearing the above title is from a sketch made in a rude chapel erected for the slaves on a cotton plantation near Port Royal (South Carolina), now in the possession of the Federal forces.'⁷ Port Royal island was in fact the very first bridgehead for Union forces in South Carolina; it fell in 1861. Starting in late 1862, the Emancipation Proclamation was read throughout the small territory controlled by the army of the North; earnest and well-meaning New England humanitarians had already settled in the area to carry out the so-called 'Port Royal Experiment', with plans to turn the freedpeople into industrious workers and self-sufficient farmers; British missionaries and philanthropists who had been doing similar work in the Caribbean for almost seventy years would have recognised and applauded their project.⁸ The South Carolina plantation in the illustration was the home of newly freed African Americans, not slaves at all. The fact is that 'Family Worship in a Plantation in South Carolina', far from being an objective record of life in the 'Slave States of America' in a time of war, imaginatively re-enslaves free African Americans in the interests of a paternalistic vision of black culture. 'Strong attachment and fidelity' to the 'master' was precisely the kind of locution used by proslavery advocates to describe Caribbean slaves in the period before 1833. The book reviewer's progressive narrative of 'advancing civilisation', in which the end of slavery is seen as an undoubted good deed and an historical inevitability, is turned into the romance of a lost world of rustic simplicity about to be overrun by the symbolic arrival of modern, northern capitalism in the shape of a Federal supply train that neither sublime, looming cliffs nor gallant Confederate fighters can hope to turn back.

The history of the Caribbean – which from the point of view of Britain is the history of vast wealth, success, and imperial centrality turning into impoverishment and marginality – is continually transforming itself into romance. By the turn of the twentieth century, in a popular imperial history series aimed at British schoolchildren, the West Indies did not even merit a complete volume, as India, Canada, and New Zealand did, but were bundled with Gibraltar and Malta in the volume *Outposts of Empire*. The author, John Lang, introduced the volume thus:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87626-1 - Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World, 1780-1870

Tim Watson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

No attempt has been made in this volume to write a history of any of the places touched upon; the endeavour rather has been to extract from their history a portion of the Romance with which each is saturated. But to deal adequately with such a subject is impossible; there is in the history of the British West Indian Islands alone sufficient Romance to fill space many times larger than this book.⁹

As the place almost exclusively of piracy and slavery, the Caribbean became the very opposite of an outpost of progress. It is a short step forward from Lang's schoolboy romance to the notorious pronouncement of V. S. Naipaul: 'The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.'¹⁰ And it is likewise a short step back from Lang's account of the outposts of empire to James Anthony Froude's notorious pronouncement in *The English in the West Indies*:

There are no people there in the true sense of the word, with a character and a purpose of their own, unless to some extent in Cuba, and therefore when the wind has changed and the wealth for which the islands were alone valued is no longer to be made among them, and slavery is no longer possible and would not pay if it were, there is nothing to fall back upon. The palaces of the English planters and merchants fall to decay; their wines and their furniture, their books and their pictures, are sold or dispersed. Their existence is a struggle to keep afloat, and one by one they go under in the waves.¹¹

Writing twenty years earlier in response to Froude's history of England, the book reviewer of the *Illustrated London News* might have been forecasting these very lines while assuring the paper's readers that the turn from fiction to history would nevertheless have its literary rewards: 'They need not fear a dearth of romance, for many are the romantic features of history, and the expressiveness of those features suffers no detriment from so powerful a limner as Mr. Froude.'¹² For Froude, the disappearing world of the planters makes the West Indies a place of loss and, therefore, fundamentally a place of romance.¹³

My book works against the idea that the Caribbean was a nineteenth-century 'outpost' easily relegated to the mode of historical romance while the real story took place at the imagined centre, with the history of England. Instead, I try to recover some of the stories and, however imperfectly, the experiences of specific people in a specific place and time. In this book there are moments of history in its realist mode, my modest contribution to the proliferating and impressive body of work on the history of the nineteenth-century Caribbean.¹⁴ At the centre of my story, the setting for at least a portion of each of my chapters is southeastern Jamaica, consisting of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87626-1 - Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World, 1780-1870

Tim Watson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: realism and romance*

5

parishes of St David and St Thomas-in-the-East (combined they became the parish of St Thomas after the administrative reorganisation of the island in the later 1860s). This area could be seen as typical of the anglophone Caribbean in the nineteenth century. Dominated economically, culturally, and politically by large sugar plantations, it was also a place of smallholdings, medium-sized coffee plantations, and regional ports like Morant Bay. While connected to the commercial capital Kingston and the political capital Spanish Town to the west, and therefore to the wider world of the Caribbean region and the imperial centre in London, eastern Jamaica was dominated topographically by the immense mass of the Blue Mountains, home to the free Maroon communities, and a place symbolically and legally that the apparatus of British rule could barely reach. Without overlooking the significant differences between this area of Jamaica and other parts of the island, and indeed of the Caribbean region as a whole – and with the cautionary point in mind, made well by David Lambert in his recent book on creole culture in Barbados, that Jamaica has often been made to stand in uncritically for the Caribbean as a whole – I focus on this one part of the island as a typical, rather than central, part of the empire, and I hope that by returning to it in each chapter, I can give some sense of subaltern Caribbean life and culture in the nineteenth century.¹⁵

Alongside, and sometimes against, an emphasis on how the Caribbean is described and understood from the point of view of Britain, therefore, I spend significant time in the pages that follow analysing colonial documents, missionary archives, and Jamaican newspapers and pamphlets in order to recover some of the contours of everyday life in a world being transformed by religious revolutions and political developments. To do so, of course, is to read the archives against their own grain, dominated as they are by the point of view of the British and creole authorities that created and maintained them. Two related problems emerge in my study at this point. On the one hand, I confront the issue that this kind of history from below always involves what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls a ‘scandalous’ translation of the fundamentally religious worldview of the subaltern classes into the necessarily secular language of the disenchanted historian.¹⁶ On the other hand, I show how the very archives from which we can begin to reconstruct the history of an event like the Demerara rebellion, for example, which I address in chapter 2 – missionary letters and records, trial transcripts and depositions, British Parliamentary Papers, and so forth – tend themselves to follow the mode of romance when it comes to Caribbean materials, rather than the administrative realism they display on the surface, thus blurring again the distinctions between history and fiction, and between romance and realism.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87626-1 - Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World, 1780-1870

Tim Watson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

In the end, then, *Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World* shows that realism and romance in the Caribbean context cannot be easily disentangled, just as in the nineteenth century Britain and the West Indies were mutually constitutive rather than discrete entities. Again and again, the attempt to narrate the Caribbean from the point of view of plausibility, verifiability, and reason – realism, in other words – turns into the very forms it seeks to avoid: romantic narrative and its cognates, the gothic, the sentimental, and the melodrama. For example, Benjamin Moseley's *Treatise on Tropical Diseases* (1803) interrupts its scientific apparatus to provide an excursus on the power of the moon, something that had been recognised by classical authorities and by peasants everywhere but that has been lost by modern civilisation, according to the army doctor in Jamaica (see chapter 1); likewise, Moseley's resolutely statistical account of the preeminent tropical commodity in his *Treatise on Sugar* (1800) is also the principal source for the tale of the Jamaican outlaw Three-Fingered Jack.¹⁷ The reverse is also true: it is sometimes in the distortions, exaggerations, and assumptions of superiority in Caribbean romance that the latterday historian and cultural critic can discern the reality of everyday life in the nineteenth-century West Indies. The implausible gothic romance of *Hamel, the Obeah Man* (1827), set in eastern Jamaica, whose likely author I identify in chapter 2 as the creole Blue Mountain coffee planter Charles White Williams, may give us more valuable information than the more humane accounts of missionaries and colonial administrators about Caribbean slave revolts, conversions to Christianity, and the attempts by the enslaved to create relatively autonomous zones of cultural life. Romance and realism are never far apart in the transatlantic circuits that joined Britain and the Caribbean in the nineteenth century.

Catherine Hall, in her magisterial *Civilising Subjects*, has painstakingly demonstrated the wealth of personal, religious, and commercial links that bound Britain – and the regional centre of Birmingham, in particular – to Jamaica in the nineteenth century both before and after emancipation in the 1830s.¹⁸ (Here I might add a quirky footnote to Hall's book. The copy of John Lang's romantic history of the Caribbean, *Outposts of Empire*, that I consulted had somehow made its way across the Atlantic to the stacks of Richter Library in Miami: inside was a tram ticket, issued by Birmingham Corporation Tramways, 'Ordinary / Fare 2½d', suggesting that Caribbean romance found a place in the mundane daily life of the English Midlands commuter in the early twentieth century.)¹⁹ I take Hall's timeline and cross-cultural methodology as my models here, and seek likewise to disrupt the conventional sense that the Caribbean colonies during this period were

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87626-1 - Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World, 1780-1870

Tim Watson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: realism and romance*

7

peripheral and becoming more so. But since my focus is more on cultural production than Hall's, I hope also to challenge the marginal status of the Caribbean in the critical discourse of nineteenth-century literary history. In relation to British fiction, and to realist fiction in particular, postcolonial criticism has been pushing the Caribbean from margin to centre. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' insisted on the importance of the Jamaican creole Bertha and of the problem of slavery in reading *Jane Eyre*; a few years later, Edward Said announced the project that would become *Culture and Imperialism* with his provocative and transformative analysis of *Mansfield Park*, showing the ways in which the resolutely English and domestic worlds of Jane Austen could only be understood in terms of their dependence on Antiguan culture and commodities.²⁰ Spivak's and Said's work has been extended and amplified in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary studies of the Caribbean by critics such as Srinivas Aravamudan, Moira Ferguson, Thomas Krise, Keith Sandiford, and Jenny Sharpe, among many others; moreover, Sean Goudie has recently made a compelling case for the central role of the Caribbean in the literature and culture of the early years of the United States republic.²¹ Increasingly, histories of literature in English, and of the novel in particular, have to treat the Caribbean not as the 'other setting', as Said characterised Austen's use of Antigua in *Mansfield Park*, but as a central aspect of literary history. I hope that this book takes its place within that critical trajectory.

It is perhaps useful to remind ourselves, then, that the novel traditionally assigned the status of founding text of the English realist novel, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, is a Caribbean story. By this I mean not simply that the bulk of the novel is set in the Caribbean: its 'setting' has often been the first aspect of Defoe's novel to disappear in critical accounts that emphasise the development of character or the relationship among realist plausibility, manipulable objects, and the rise of capitalism. It is rather that the Caribbean is the source of realism and imperial capitalism themselves, the place where the proper use of tropical things comes to define the individual liberal subject of modernity embodied in Crusoe. The objects Crusoe rescues from the wreck are in fact doubly creolised: they are mostly European items from Brazil – whence Crusoe and his doomed shipmates set out for West Africa on a slaving voyage – now recovered to form the basis for a new European culture on the Caribbean island. As Crusoe learns the proper use value of everything on the island, his cultivation of the land and control over the labour power of, in turn, Friday, Friday's father, and the Spanish and English sailors make the Caribbean the preeminent site for

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87626-1 - Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World, 1780-1870

Tim Watson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the establishment of a series of general statements about the development of colonial ownership from small-scale settlement to the sovereignty over whole regions of the earth. Crusoe speaks in a cumulative and accumulative sequence of 'my house' (49), 'my enclosure' (50), 'my habitation' (51), 'my country-house, and my sea-coast house' (82), 'my side of the island' (88), 'my arable land' (93), 'my man Friday' (164), and, logically and finally, 'my island, as I now call it' (176).²² The relationship between personhood and thinghood, and between the individual and the social contract, are from the beginning and at the same time the key problems of British realist fiction and of Caribbean culture, as *Robinson Crusoe* demonstrates.

Friday embodies the tension between slavery and the imagined primacy of the liberal subject. This contradiction is there in the incoherent gap between the 'my' and the 'man' of 'my man Friday', and in the fluid series of roles – servant, companion, assistant, and creature – that Friday fills in Crusoe's imagination as he sees the former fleeing from his would-be butchers on the beach: 'It came now very warmly upon my thoughts, and indeed irresistibly, that now was my time to get me a servant, and perhaps a companion or assistant; and that I was call'd plainly by Providence to save this poor creature's life.'²³ But if we see the beginnings of the discourse of humanitarian imperialism here that would come to dominate British colonial ideology by the end of slavery days in the 1830s – the legitimization of the domination of one people by another under the banner of saving poor creatures' lives – we also see that in literature the coloniser could acknowledge, albeit surreptitiously and haphazardly, the culture of the colonised. Friday is named for the day he is saved, but the practice of day names is actually something Defoe borrows from West African culture.²⁴ Although Defoe is careful to make Friday an indigenous Central American, rather than a 'Negro' – 'His hair was long and black, not curl'd like wool... his nose small, not flat like the Negroes, a very good mouth, thin lips'²⁵ – he is aligned here with the countless enslaved Africans named Cuffee (Friday), Quamina (Saturday), and Quashie (Sunday) in the Americas.

And if Friday's naming suggests the importance of a creolised slave culture with which the Caribbean authorities had forever to contend, it also suggests a problem in the structure of the realist mode of fiction itself, based as it is on calculability, reason, and verifiable facts. Although Crusoe imagines that the providential arrival of a future slave or companion means that the Englishman comes to possess time itself – 'now was my time to get me a servant' – the fact is that Crusoe cannot properly keep track of the days in the Caribbean, that the calculations on which the commerce of sugar and slavery depended were liable to failure, and that therefore 'Friday' has the wrong name:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87626-1 - Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World, 1780-1870

Tim Watson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: realism and romance*

9

I fell into a sound sleep, and wak'd no more, till by the sun it must necessarily be near three a'clock in the afternoon the next day; nay, to this hour I'm partly of the opinion, that I slept all the next day and night, and till almost three that day after; for otherwise I knew not how I should lose a day out of my reckoning in the days of the week, as it appear'd some years after I had done.²⁶

Crusoe is able to cure himself of his tropical fever through his immersion in the Bible and his personal conversion experience, but this moment of rescue is also the moment of the failure of accounting practices: 'I found at the end of my account I had lost a day or two in my reckoning.'²⁷ Friday, then, might more accurately be named Saturday (in which case he would share his name with Quamina, the leader of the Demerara slave rebellion I discuss in chapter 2).

The Atlantic world in general, and the slave trade in particular, are the prime sites for what Ian Baucom has called 'actuarial historicism' – the production of objectified 'types' based on the protocols of insurance and accounting, and associated by Baucom with the typical characters of realist fiction.²⁸ Nevertheless, *Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World* suggests that bookkeeping practices were never fully capable of transforming the humanity of the enslaved into numbers. Realist fiction, associated with metonymy, contiguity, and the attempt to represent an expanding web of social relations from the eighteenth century onwards, became an important venue for the creation of imaginative relationships that link England, and its expansionist commercial classes in particular, to the Caribbean and other corners of the empire. These imaginative relationships are governed by the logic of sensibility, in which the newly mobile bourgeois (for example, Crusoe, the third son of a German-born merchant) show 'their ethical superiority to their aristocratic rivals by demonstrating their capacity to share in (or, at least, remonstrate against) the sufferings of their unequal, lower-rank, fellows', like the poor creature, Friday.²⁹ If realist fiction functions on one level as part of the imperial, capitalist project of the 'contractual management of inequality',³⁰ however, it also contains the potential for the representation of human relations as fellowship, in which Friday is a 'companion' and a sovereign subject, rather than a 'servant' or an 'assistant'. Ironically, though, this potential fellowship tends to flash up in moments of romance, rather than the ostensibly more egalitarian realm of realism. Friday is a fellow on the basis of a loss we can associate with romance – in this case, the loss of a day in Crusoe's account, which throws realism out of joint. And while *Hamel, the Obeah Man*, for example, presents Jamaica as the exotic, other setting of romance, and even though it presumes the inequality of planter and slave, white and black, it is also the novel with the fullest depiction of slave insurgency, with the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87626-1 - Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World, 1780-1870

Tim Watson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

strongest representation of Caribbean humanity in its eponymous hero, and with the most intimate sense of the relationships that bound Britain and Jamaica together in the nineteenth century. If in history writing the Caribbean has suffered from a surfeit of romance, as John Lang's and James Anthony Froude's works suggest, in fiction we could almost say that the problem has been that there has been too much realism and not enough romance.

Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World is divided broadly into two parts. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the period between the late eighteenth century and the moment just before emancipation in the 1830s; chapters 3 and 4 focus on the 1860s, with the Morant Bay rebellion of 1865 as the catalysing event of the period. Like Diana Paton, in her fine study of the Jamaican legal system *No Bond but the Law* – a book that, in a happy convergence, covers precisely the same period as this one – I am trying here to challenge the ‘assumption of a complete break between slavery and “freedom”’, and to join with those ‘scholars of slavery and emancipation [who] look across the great divide of the 1830s’.³¹ The first half of the book focuses on syncretic African-Caribbean versions of Christianity as the lens through which to analyse respectability and insurgency amongst the enslaved population of the Caribbean. Although British representations tended to divide Caribbean religion into the typical figures of the dangerous obeah man or woman, on the one hand, and the respectable, subservient churchgoer on the other, the reality on the ground was that these figures were often one and the same. If George Liele, the Georgia-born former slave who was the first to bring Baptism to Jamaica in the eighteenth century, complained to the Baptist Missionary Society in London that his work was hampered by ‘superstition’ among the Jamaican slaves, it is also true that Liele and his followers like Moses Baker laid the foundations for the syncretic, Afro-Christian ‘Native Baptist’ churches that so often troubled the official Baptist churches after the British missionaries began to arrive at the end of the eighteenth century (and eastern Jamaica in particular was fertile ground for these independent Baptist churches).³² Recognising the centrality of subaltern religious life in Caribbean nineteenth-century culture, I focus in the first two chapters on such figures as Mary Lindsay (chapter 1), an enslaved woman who became a contributor to a society for converting fellow slaves in St Thomas-in-the-East in the 1820s; on Hamel, the title character of the anonymously published 1827 novel (chapter 2), who explodes the stereotype of the obeah man from the inside by practising and defending what he does not hesitate to call his ‘religion’ against the