

The American Revolution, the West Indies, and the Future of Plantation British America



The American Revolution was disruptive and challenging for plantation societies. Its most significant long-term effect was an artificial separation of the British Empire. The aftermath of the American Revolution saw the northern and southern sections of the pre-revolutionary British Empire separated, with the new United States of America intruding itself between Canada and the West Indian islands. The more significant shift was in plantation America. The natural links between slave societies in British America were broken, reducing the long-term ability of slave societies to unite against outside forces. Certainly, if the artificial split of the plantation colonies that occurred in 1776 had not happened, Union victory over the Confederate South in 1865 would conceivably have been much harder.

One lesson that British imperialists refused to learn from the American Revolution was that the prejudices of settler elites needed to be respected. That was not a policy that Britain adopted. The British Empire from the 1780s onward became more, not less, authoritarian and became ever more dependent upon metropolitan direction exercised tightly among a close group of initiates experienced in plantation affairs. Governors were unwilling to put up with any opposition from settlers who upheld the principles of local autonomy that led the residents of the Thirteen Colonies into revolt. Such imperial obstinacy proved especially problematic for West Indian planters. Britain acted less consultatively and less in the interests of West Indians after the American Revolution than before. In 1784, for example, against strong West Indian protests, they severed the West Indies economically from North America by insisting on recognizing the United States of America as a foreign nation whose ships should be banned from British ports. For the first time in the eighteenth century, and increasingly thereafter, West Indian lobbyists in London found themselves unable to get their way in West Indian policy matters. This diminished political influence, moreover, was combined with a British tendency to see West Indian planters less as gauche *nouveau riches* who brought material benefits to the Empire than as crude, cruel, sexually lascivious deviants. Metropolitan opinion saw West Indian planters as given to "mongrelisation" in their relations with black women. As a consequence, they were thought to be intellectually and morally bankrupt.

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It was not economics but politics that was the real problem facing the West Indies after the American Revolution. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, Jamaican planters came under scrutiny (mostly unfavorable) as never before. Britons accepted the new principles of an imperialism that was beginning to bestride the globe but felt distinctly queasy about particular aspects of its commerce and governance. White West Indians were the first in a long line of Loyalists abandoned by Britain (the Northern Irish may have been the last). Beginning from 1783, British imperial officials showed repeated readiness to sacrifice colonial aspirations if such aspirations did not suit imperial aims. In short, Britain showed little respect for Loyalists after the American Revolution had finished and when Loyalists had become more of a problem than a resource.

The West Indian planter cut a sad figure from the late 1780s onward. The representational image of the planter may have been based on that of the oriental pasha, but depictions of actual planters tended toward the pathetic rather than the tyrannical. Planters were not seen as they saw themselves:

British gentlemen, of upright character, firm morals, capable of moderation, self-restraint, and refined gentility. Rather, planters were seen through an Orientalist lens, a discourse predicated on a humoralist understanding of the malign effects that exchanging a temperate climate and lifestyle for a tropical way of life meant for Europeans. Planters were wealthy, but depictions of their wealth were undercut by representations of decadence and corruption coded as luxury, effeminacy, gluttony, racial degeneracy, or sexual hybridity.

Seeing the American Revolution in an Atlantic rather than an American perspective allows us to take the perspective that Samuel Johnson did on planter pretensions in 1775 when he expostulated on the irony of hearing yelps of liberty from the drivers of slaves. [The American Revolution was a war fought by planters in part to protect, defend, and expand slavery.](#) One of the fundamental rights that British American planters insisted upon was their right not only to own slaves; they also wanted to be able to determine within their own legislatures the laws under which their investment in slave property would be protected. The planters of the American South after 1787 largely succeeded in ring-fencing slavery from interference from outside forces, whether these forces were British imperial rulers or northern abolitionists. Some of the most important people in America were deeply invested in slavery and its continuation.

Not all of those people were slaveholders, but those who were insisted on protections for slavery, especially the right of slaveholders to police their slaves and the right to have runaway slaves returned to them from any part of the United States. [As events turned out, slaveholders in the American South made the correct decision to rebel against Britain in order to protect their investment in slave property.](#) William Lloyd Garrison was correct to see the new United States government as being founded on a pro-slavery constitution. The small gains that abolitionists made in the American North were surpassed by the gains slaveholders achieved in limiting the ability of a powerful centralized government to insist on the amelioration of slavery. France and Britain both insisted on the amelioration of slavery in the late 1780s. They then ended slavery by imperial decree—France in 1794 and Britain in 1833. Southern slaveholders were able to control the discourse over slavery, and were able to stop a powerful centralized state from interfering in their affairs. That strategy worked until southern planters decided to destroy themselves by seceding from the United States of America in 1861.

The greatest threat to slavery thus proved to be an assertive, self-confident imperial state with centralizing tendencies. Britain became such a state after 1788. It tried aggressively to reshape its empire in its own image, confident that Britain was the ideal model for any imperial society. West Indian planters found out to their cost how willing Britain was to interfere in matters that colonial people thought were their own business. The most important matter colonials believed they should control was how their slaves should be treated. Britons increasingly disagreed. Thus, West Indians were caught in a bind not of their own making. The republican tendencies of America appalled them. Their

loyalty to the king remained a paramount political value. They could not join in the American republican experiment. But they became increasingly aware of how the American Revolution had encouraged Britons to traduce planters' character in ways that diminished planters' importance, whether the planters in question lived in America or in the West Indies. And they realized that many Britons wanted to end the institution of slavery, the institution that sustained West Indian prosperity.

West Indian planters also lamented how little influence they had in a radically reformed British Empire in which everyone was a subject and in which most subjects were not white. William Wilberforce and other abolitionists seemed to them madmen. West Indians thought abolition a mindless policy designed to destroy British prosperity, especially in the islands. But West Indians were in a dramatically weaker position after 1783 in an empire with relatively few slaveholders. Moreover, the increasing number of Britons who thought slavery wrong left West Indian planters unable to stop British "madness." That madness, as they saw it, was to wreck a great economic system in which the sufferings of Africans no one needed to care about brought about an advance in the standard of living of white people everywhere. Thus, the American Revolution had important political consequences for the part of British America that did not join the rebellion in 1776. West Indians lost control of slavery, which was critically important to them. Meanwhile, their northern cousins—previously less powerful than the West Indians had been in imperial circles—increased their power over slavery, at least in the areas of the Americas where slavery was most important.

Further Reading

For treatments of the American Revolution in plantation societies, see David Brion Davis, "American Slavery and the American Revolution," in Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (Urbana, Ill., 1983): 283-301 and Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, 2000). The British context is summarized in Stephen A. Conway, *The British Isles and the War for American Independence* (Oxford, 2000) and Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York, 2011). The declining public reputation of West Indian planters after the war is covered in Trevor Burnard, "Powerless Masters: The Curious Decline of Jamaican Sugar Planters in the Foundational Period of British Abolitionism," *Slavery & Abolition* 32 (2011): 185-98 and Christer Petley, "Gluttony, excess, and the fall of the planter class in the British Caribbean," *Atlantic Studies* 9 (2012): 85-106.

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