

“Quamina, do you hear this?”
Revisiting the Demerara Slave Rebellion, 1823

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I re-examine primary documentation relating to the Demerara Rebellion of 1823. I engage in this exploration to ascertain whether previous narratives of the rebellion were correct in that all of the slaves on the East Coast of Demerara, numbering more than 9,000 in total, took part in an armed uprising against planters and British officials in an attempt to gain their freedom. I also consider, based on slaves' demands for two or three days a week off for working on their own homes and provision grounds, the validity of some historians' arguments that the Rebellion resembled a labour-related protest for better daily working conditions. According to my interpretation of the primary sources, I have concluded that both reasons for rebelling were present, and hinged upon individual slaves' evaluation of a desirable or attainable outcome. I have also determined that there is no documented evidence to support a claim that all of the slaves rebelled, nor is the number of over 9,000 reasonable. It was, nevertheless, a large-scale uprising. Previous narratives, based primarily upon white fears, have underestimated the nuanced and sophisticated ways in which slaves considered the options available to them to better their lives.

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CHAPTER ONE:

Introduction

On November 11, 1823, a slave named Peter was sworn in as a witness to the court martial proceedings following a slave rebellion which had occurred in August in Demerara. Peter identified himself as an attendant at Bethel Chapel, located on the plantation *Le Resouviner*, to which he belonged. The Judge Advocate questioned Peter as to having seen the accused rebel leader, Quamina, at the house of Reverend John Smith, the white British parson accused of instigating the Rebellion. Quamina had come to ask Smith's advice about the contents of a "paper" from Britain being kept secret by the colony's governor, and if it were true, as rumours had it, that it announced the slaves' freedom. Talk of rising against the white officials and planters was running through the slave quarters locally, and Quamina and his son Jack were influential slaves who would come to be accused as ringleaders of the rebels. Peter testified that he heard Smith advise Quamina not to rush into anything as ameliorative measures for the slaves were ordered in the missive, and that to rebel now might see these improvements rejected by the planters. "Quamina, don't bring yourself into any disgrace," advised Smith, "Quamina, do you hear this?"¹ On August 18, plantation owners and managers were alerted that slaves from a number of plantations had risen, demanding their freedom, while others came to believe that the slaves were really asking for the ameliorative measures promised by the British government to be put into effect. The Rebellion itself lasted a few short days, but retribution was violent and carried on for weeks.² When the uprising had been contained, all three men were

¹ Quamina was executed after going on the run during the Rebellion. His son, Jack, was exiled after providing testimony to the colony's officials.

² Michael Craton, "The Demerara Revolt, 1823," in *Testing the Chains*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982): 283-287. The skirmishes among groups of slaves and whites began on August 18, 1823 and continued until at least

accused of instigating and/or leading the Rebellion. Smith was sentenced to death but succumbed to galloping consumption in jail. Quamina, went on the run, hiding in the “bush” beyond the plantations with sporadic forays to the estates. He was eventually tracked and shot dead by one of the “bush Negroes” or maroons who assisted colonial authorities in tracking runaways; his remains hung in chains until little was left of his corpse. He apparently would not surrender, never pausing in his stride as the man hunting him took aim.³ Jack testified for the colonial authorities and was sent into exile.⁴

Smith, Quamina and Jack’s stories are part of a narrative of the Rebellion which has been accepted by historians but it needs to be re-examined in light of recent scholarship which has led to a re-examination of slave rebellions and conspiracies. Historians Michael L. Nicolls, Michael P. Johnson, and Jason T. Sharples have each examined slave conspiracies and rebellions and found that the predominant narratives of events were likely exaggerated by contemporary whites and by later historians.⁵ Their work will be examined in detail in relation to my investigation of the Demerara Rebellion.

The Demerara Rebellion of 1823 was one of three major slave uprisings in the British Caribbean in the last two decades before emancipation. This rebellion marked the mid-point between Bussa’s Rebellion in Barbados (1816) and Jamaica’s Baptist War (1831-32), also

August 20, when the largest reported contingent of slaves faced troops at *Bachelor’s Adventure*. Craton provides a useful condensed version of the activities of rebels and white troops wherein he described troops “mopping up” later in the day on August 20, and goes on to describe the continuing arrests and executions.

³ *Ibid*, 229.

⁴ Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994): 229, 244; Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 288-289.

⁵ Michael L. Nicholls, *Whispers of Rebellion: Narrating Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012); Michael P. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (October, 2001): 915-976; Jason T. Sharples, “Discovering Slave Conspiracies: New Fears of Rebellion and Old Paradigms of Plotting in Seventeenth-Century Barbados,” *American Historical Review*, (June, 2015): 811-843.

known as the Christmas Uprising and the Great Jamaica Slave Revolt. In addition to occurring within the lead-up to emancipation during a time of increasingly vigorous outcry from British citizens against the institution of slavery, the reported immense size, far-reaching effects, and certain shared themes within the three rebellions serve to connect them. However, Demerara stands out for two principal reasons: first, that a white missionary was held accountable and sentenced to death; and second, that it is said that *all* of the slaves on the East Coast of Demerara rose against their white oppressors. In this thesis, I consider two main themes. The first asks whether all of the slaves did rebel, and whether they did or did not, how many rebels were there? My second major topic in the thesis concerns a question intricately woven with the other two large rebellions in this period. Was the Demerara Rebellion a desire by slaves to completely overturn the institution of slavery in Demerara in a quest for immediate freedom, was their objective more in line with a labour protest to reform their working conditions within the institution, or does the Rebellion indicate something more complex in the ways in which slaves sought to better their lives?

I explore, in this thesis, the reported circumstances of the Rebellion in depth via documentation written before, during, and afterward. I also assess how it fits within the historiography of nineteenth-century slave rebellions in the Caribbean, and re-examine the narrative describing and analyzing this rebellion which has gone unquestioned by historians for decades. While I thoroughly investigate primary sources, looking for specifics which would contribute to a clearer understanding of the Rebellion and its intent, I also raise questions regarding slaves' individuality and experiences within the system of slavery. In particular, I look for responses to opportunities for improvement of conditions for a group of people with distinct characters and individual ways of interpreting such opportunities. This is not only a strict search

for numbers or locations with which to support or challenge previous narratives of the Demerara Rebellion, but is also an equally important search for evidence of how slaves regarded circumstances when documentary evidence is seldom provided by the slaves themselves. In the thesis, I provide a wider field from which to draw evidence into a conceptual frame by using comparisons between Demerara and another Emancipation Era rebellion, documented statements from various sources, and by engaging with historians' theories on these slave uprisings.

This thesis offers a close reading of the primary sources for the Demerara Rebellion in light of questions raised by historians such as Nicolls, Sharples, and Johnson about white interpretations of rumoured slave rebellions. All three of these historians have suggested that the extent of individual slave rebellions was exaggerated by whites in power and that historians have continued to reiterate those exaggerations. I will use several key documents, including the journal of Reverend John Smith, Governor John Murray's narrative of the Rebellion, a published narrative by Joshua Bryant, a later version by a representative of the London Missionary Society, the debate on the Rebellion within the House of Commons in 1824, despatches from Governor Murray to the Colonial Office, letters between governmental authorities, court martial trial transcripts, and other documentation from Demerara and England.⁶ These sources, while having

⁶ Smith, John. *Journal Containing Various Occurrences at Le Resouvenir, Demerara*, by John Smith, Missionary, 1817, The National Archives, CO111/46. Records of the Colonial Office (Further cited as "Smith, *Journal*"): <http://www.slavery.amdigital.co.uk.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/Contents/DocumentDetails.aspx?documentid=440186&prevPos=440186&let=J&vpath=Defa>; Murray, Governor John. *Despatch to Earl Bathurst*, Colonial Office, London, August 24, 1823, Demerara and Essequibo, Missionary Smith's Case, 1823-1825, The National Archives, CO 111/53: 10-13. *Slavery, Abolition & Social Justice* (Further cited as "Murray, *Despatch*"). <http://www.slavery.amdigital.co.uk.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/Contents/DocumentDetails.aspx?documentid=440188&prevPos=440188&let=D&vpath=Default&pi=1>; Bryant, Joshua. *An Account of an Insurrection of the Negro Slaves in the Colony of Demerara, Which Broke out on the 18th of August, 1823* (Printed by A. Stevenson, at the Guiana Chronicle Office, Georgetown, 1823); <https://archive.org/details/accountaninsurr00bryagoog>; Wallbridge, Edwin Angel. *The Demerara Martyr: Memoirs of the Rev. John Smith, Missionary to Demerara*, (Charles Gilpin: London, 1848): <https://merrick.library.miami.edu/cdm/ref/collection/scbooks/id/10139>; House of Commons, Britain. *Substance of the Debate in the House of Commons on Tuesday the 2st and on Friday the 11th of June, 1824, on a*

been examined previously by at least one historian, Emilia Viotti da Costa, appear to have been underutilized. Within the little which has been written about the Demerara Rebellion, historians tend to cite da Costa and Craton, rather than the primary documents.

Chapter Two discusses the historiography of the Demerara Rebellion, some of which, being particularly relevant to certain issues in the thesis, will be explored in further detail in the following chapters. Because of the relatively small amount which has been written by historians about the Demerara Rebellion, some of Chapter Two will look at slave rebellions in a more general manner, particularly in reference to the three which took place in the British Caribbean in the years after 1815 and leading up to the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833.

Chapter Three provides an in-depth description of several people who were said to have played a major role in the Rebellion. Some, like Governor John Murray and Michael McTurk, had a history of having been admonished by the Colonial Office for poor performance in appointed tasks, being under the influence of powerful planters, and known to have a particular animosity toward missionaries. Others, like the slave Quamina, had distinct characteristics which made him seem to slaveholding whites like the ideal rebel leader. A focus on certain people and events will highlight the ongoing tensions and animosities which existed in the colony prior to the Rebellion. I will demonstrate that much of the narrative of the Rebellion

Motion of Henry Brougham, Esq. Respecting the Trial and Condemnation to Death by a Court Martial of the Rev. John Smith, Late Missionary in the Colony of Demerara [sic]. With a Preface, Containing Some new facts illustrative of the Subject. Published with the Sanction of the London Missionary Society. (London: Ellerton and Henderson, Gough Square. Sold by J. Hatchard and Son, Picadilly; L.B. Seeley and Son, Fleet Street; F. Westley, Stationers' Court; and J. and A. Arch, Cornhill, 1824) (Further cited as "*House of Commons Debate*"): <https://www.loc.gov/resource/lst.059/?sp=18>; LMS, *Trial Proceedings*, 129.

centered around the undue influence of these particular white men and reflected their fears and beliefs about slaves. These characters had a significant role in the Rebellion itself, and in the later reports about it. The descriptions provided are of assistance in understanding the situation within Demerara, as well as important considerations for assessing the reliability of certain sources.

Chapter Four consists primarily of the narrative of the Rebellion itself, taken from a step-by-step comparison of several sources. This is followed by an examination of theories around slave rebellions and conspiracies in further detail than the review of historiography the second chapter provides. I will also provide a comparison of the Demerara Rebellion with Barbados' Bussa's Rebellion. I note similarities and differences in physical aspects of the colonies and their populations and in how the actions of slaves were perceived regarding the question of what was a rebellion for immediate freedom and what was labour protest. I will also discuss indications that Bussa's Rebellion appears to have more evidence for a potential inversion of the colony's power structure than found in Demerara, although both reflect what were likely white expectations of slave behaviour resulting from entrenched ideas of slave rebellions in general. After further explorations into the idea of slave sovereignty as a possible outcome of rebellion in the Atlantic World, I follow with an appraisal of reported rebel leaders and how white paranoia contributed to certain individuals and types as being suspects in this role, along with examples of slaves who exhibited the traits which made them potential leaders

Chapter Five considers accounts of the Demerara Rebellion as told by some historians and popular sources, and whether they are based in fact. I consider statements found in documents connected with the Rebellion which support my argument that some claims were exaggerated or embellished to provide a flattering image of the authorities and troops in

Demerara. Connected with this argument, I present my findings which indicate a plausible number of slaves who actively took part in the Rebellion of 1823. I consider the estates from which the accused slaves belonged, how they and specific white witnesses came to testify, and offer possible explanations for an exaggeration in numbers. I also provide an appraisal of reported rebel leaders and how white paranoia contributed to certain individuals and types as being suspects in this role along with examples of slaves who exhibited the traits which made them potential leaders.

In my conclusion, I further address the significance of my calculations regarding the number of active slave rebels and the question of whether the Rebellion more resembled an attempted takeover of the colony or a protest over authorities' non-compliance with directives regarding labour practices in the form of ameliorative measures. I consider prevailing attitudes of whites who were conscious of their place in a social hierarchy above lower class whites and slaves, including what this meant for Demerara as a colony in a time of rebellion.

In studies of slave history, few historians have examined Demerara in the same detail as uprisings or conspiracies occurring in mainland America such as South Carolina or Virginia. The colony of Demerara-Essiquibo, in what became British Guiana and later Guyana, existed on the periphery of the British Empire in the Atlantic, although for a time it was a well-known and profitable colony.⁷ Only one book written by an academic, da Costa's *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, has made an impact on the historiography of the Demerara Rebellion, although

⁷ Demerara and Essiquibo are joined in much of the literature referring to slave populations and government. It is difficult to distinguish exactly when the two colonies were officially combined, as the term seems to be used by historians when writing of 1803 onward. In a list of Colonial Office documents, more than one governor is listed on records for Demerara-Essiquibo. Around 1814-15 only Governor John Murray is listed; it appears that around this time, when Holland formally ceded these colonies to the British, Demerara and Essiquibo were joined officially. Colonial Office Records, *List of Documents in the Public Record Office on 1st July, 1876* (London: George Edward Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1876): 86-87.

Caribbean specialist Michael Craton has written about the Rebellion in his articles.⁸ The Demerara Rebellion is referenced in other historians' articles on slavery and Caribbean history, but usually in little detail and essentially telling the same story from the same perspective of how white planters interpreted the actions of the slaves.⁹ All are agreed on the Rebellion's causes, the sequence of events, the ensuing court martial trials, and the end results. Other references, particularly on-line history sites, reiterate this narrative, if in a shortened form. The most likely reason for the short list of academic exploration and the repetitiousness of the popular narrative is that there are a number of official documents which seem to cover all the necessary ground while being easily available to historians and the public. Despatches sent by the governor at the time of the Rebellion, newspaper articles, at least two published narratives of the uprising, trial transcripts, and a House of Commons Debate which took place the following year all seem to provide the information necessary to understand the Rebellion from a twenty-first-century perspective without questioning the reliability or the entirety of the facts. Yet there is a much larger and more interesting story surrounding its history. A deep exploration of the above documents and other primary sources reveals a society seething with tension, not just between master and slave, but within all layers of society in Demerara and in its connections with

⁸ See, for example, Christa Dierkscheide, *Amelioration and Empire: Progress and Slavery in the Plantation Americas*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2014): 192. As well as Craton's *Testing the Chains*, see also: Craton, "Christianity and Slavery in the British West Indies 1750-1865," *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1 December, 1978: 141-160; Craton, "Proto-Peasant Revolts? The Late Slave Rebellions in the British West Indies 1816-1832," *Past & Present*, No. 85 (Nov., 1979): 99-125; and Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom in the Caribbean*, (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1997).

⁹ For example, see Douglas Egerton's article which provides a short reference to Demerara in support of his argument: Douglas R. Egerton, "Slaves to the Marketplace: Economic Liberty and Black Rebelliousness in the Atlantic World," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 26, No. 4, Connection, Contingency, and Class in the Early Republic's Economy, (Winter, 2006): 617-639, 634. An article by Richard Sheridan provides a typical explanation of the Demerara Rebellion: Richard B. Sheridan, "The Condition of the Slaves on the Sugar Plantations of Sir John Gladstone in the Colony of Demerara, 1812-49," *New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 76 (2002), no: 3/4, Leiden: 243-269, 247-249.

England. Political misrepresentation and acrimony among authorities and planters alike add to narratives which were part of the events which erupted in 1823.

Historians have published very little on the colonial history of Demerara, and what is available usually relates directly to the Rebellion itself, reflecting da Costa and Craton's work.¹⁰ A few of these examples which discuss aspects of Demerara's history not wholly focused on the Rebellion tend to have the region's economics as a focal point, while there are others who specifically discuss missionaries and religion in Demerara in the context of a larger view of the Atlantic World. While these are useful for providing much-needed background for a thorough study of Demerara in the era preceding and during the Rebellion, and contain information crucial to understanding slavery in Demerara, most do not analyze the Rebellion in detail, nor do they provide much information about the characters and events related to it. From primary and secondary sources there does not seem to be any indication of why little has been written about Demerara. The Guianas are a neglected region.

While I have stated that Demerara appears to be one of the lesser-known of the British Caribbean colonies today, in the latter half of the eighteenth and the greater part of the nineteenth centuries it was considered an important area for cultivation and trade, as well as in capturing the imagination of explorers and adventurers due to its lush and exotic flora and fauna, and its

¹⁰ For examples of economy-based articles, see D. Alissa Trotz and Linda Peake, "Work, family, and organising: an overview of the emergence of the economic, social and political roles of women in British Guiana," *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (December 2000): 189-222; Egerton, "Slaves to the Marketplace". For an example of missionary-related article within a wider context, see Christa Dierkscheide, "Missionaries, Evangelical Identity, and the Religious Ecology of Early Nineteenth-Century South Carolina and the British Caribbean," *American Nineteenth Century History*, Vol. 7, No. 1, (August, 2006): 63-88. Other articles of interest published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which provide a helpful background to life in Demerara include F.M. Endlich, "Demerara," *The American Naturalist*, Vol. 15, No. 12 (December, 1881): 937-946 and R. W. Lee, "Roman-Dutch Law in British Guiana," *Journal of the Society of Comparative Legislation*, Vol. 14, No. 1, (1914): 11-23.

spectacular and varied, if difficult to access, landscape.¹¹ Some explanation of the area's economy and social and political background will assist in understanding its value to Europeans, and why rising tensions among planters eventually had an effect on how they reacted to any potential slave rebelliousness.

The first Europeans to arrive in Demerara, or “Demerary” as it was sometimes known, were the Spaniards in the late fifteenth century. It was believed to be the site of the mythical El Dorado – a myth which provided encouragement for the English under Sir Walter Raleigh to land there in 1595.¹² In the early seventeenth century the Dutch established themselves in Guyana, which included a charter of the Dutch West India Company. In the latter half of the century, the Dutch and the English struggled for dominion over the region. There were numerous battles for the area during the next hundred years, including in nearby Berbice and Essequibo.¹³ Demerara changed ownership between the Dutch, the French, and the British six times between 1780 and 1803, when it finally remained in British hands until full independence in 1966.¹⁴ Thus, by 1823 a system of governance had developed which contained vestiges of Dutch custom mixed with British Common Law, despite British rule. This system would prove problematic in the lead-up to the Rebellion, particularly over issues of slaves having time off on Sundays, a practice from Dutch administration. Accordingly, as R. W. Lee stated: “The

¹¹ Rawle Farley, “The Economic Circumstances of the British Annexation of British Guiana (1795-1815),” *Revista de Historia de América*, No. 39 (June, 1955): 21-59; Endlich, “Demerara.”

¹² J. A. Carman, “History of Curare,” *Anaesthesia*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (October, 1968): 706-707; Sir Walter Raleigh, *The Discoveries of the Large, Rich, and Beautiful Empire of Guiana, With a Relation of the Great and Golden City of Manoa (Which the Spaniards call El Dorado), etc. Performed in the Year 1595*, (New York: Burt Franklin, Publisher, 1848): https://books.google.ca/books?hl=en&lr=&id=-4A7SnP2USQC&oi=fnd&pg=PR5&dq=el+dorado+&ots=EpuzNV8Qav&sig=kzWm1_zWDKjJEnDubod9ZK.

¹³ Odeen Ishmael. *The Guyana Story: From Earliest Times to Independence* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2013): 35-38.

¹⁴ Da Costa, 20; Ishmael, 182.

beginnings of British administration were marked by grave disorder.”¹⁵ In 1821 a petition was sent to the King regarding “the deplorable state of the administration of justice.” Three years later, a commission was appointed to look into criminal and civil justice in British colonies in the Caribbean and South America.¹⁶ The hybrid form of law which had developed resulted in confusion and fall-out as Demerara shifted awkwardly from local habit and tradition to English Common Law, and can be observed in records in the time period surrounding the Rebellion. This included uncertainty of the role of the Dutch-created position of Fiscal, whose duties were connected with the implementation of the *Rule on Treatment of Servants and Slaves*, a set of laws also originating with Dutch rule, but carrying over into British government, as well as the arguments over slaves having Sundays off, according to a Dutch law.¹⁷

Extensive cultivation on the Caribbean islands had a devastating effect on the soil through a depletion of nutrients, and consequently more sugar production hastened the onset of diminishing returns.¹⁸ Planters were looking for new areas to exploit and Demerara offered tremendous potential. Located on the coast of northeastern South America, Demerara/Guyana clings to the Caribbean Sea’s southernmost edge (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). It is described as being a low, flat land in coastal areas and “more broken and even mountainous” in the interior. Possessing “dense, tangled ‘bush’, [a] frequency of swamps and marshes” and wild animals, these attributes “render exploration difficult, and turn even a so-called pleasure trip into arduous labour.”¹⁹ While the interior provided almost insurmountable difficulties for slaves attempting to

¹⁵ R. W. Lee, “Roman-Dutch Law in British Guiana,” *Journal of the Society of Comparative Legislation*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1914): 11-23, 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁷ Da Costa, 44-45.

¹⁸ Farley, 21-59, 26.

¹⁹ F. M. Endlich, “Demerara,” *The American Naturalist*, Vol. 15, No. 12 (Dec., 1881): 937-946, 937-8.

escape the colony after the Rebellion, the coast was ideal for plantations. The soil was fertile as well as flat, the climate was right for sugarcane cultivation, there was land available for farming, and the many waterways allowed for easy transportation from one plantation to another and to the capital, Georgetown. Demerara was twenty times the size of Jamaica and over forty times the area of Barbados. This may, however, be somewhat misleading, as it refers to total land mass, rather than arable land.²⁰ As of 2014, the World Bank shows the percentage of arable land in Guyana to be 2.13 percent, Jamaica 11.1 percent, and Barbados 25.6 percent.²¹ While Guyana possesses considerably more arable land (4,578.8 sq km) than Jamaica (1,220.1 sq km) or Barbados (110.3 sq km), it is less than one might suppose, based on the country's size. Naturally, this can differ enormously in 200 years, but it does give some indication of the difference that a relatively flat island like Barbados can offer in comparison to Demerara's challenges of mountainous regions and thick bush.

²⁰ Farley, 25-26.

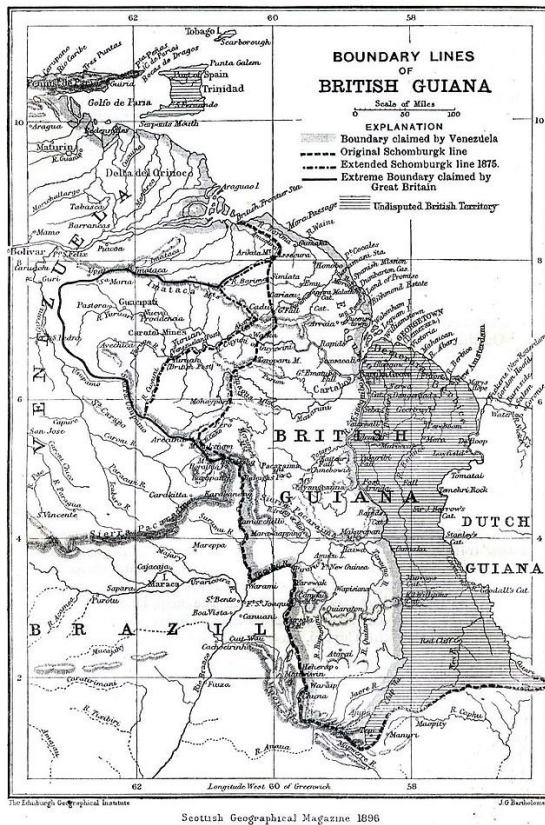
²¹ World Bank Economics, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ag.lnd.arbl.zs>.

Figure 1.1. Map of Northeastern South America showing location of Guyana/Demerara.



Source: Map data ©2018 Google: <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Guyana/@4.9392652,-63.4554055,6z/data=!3m1!4m5!3m4!1s0x8dafefaf60d8c2b3:0x48e38867b6e54440!8m2!3d4.860416!4d-58.93018>

Figure 1.2. Map dated 1896 showing boundaries of Demerara/Essiquibo.



Source: Scottish Geographical Magazine, 1896: http://www.wikiwand.com/en/British_Guiana.

Originally, most plantations were planted in coffee and cotton, but sugar became more common between 1814 and 1815, generally later than elsewhere in the Caribbean.²² Production of sugar was more labour intensive than the previous principal crops, which meant a greater expenditure in slaves, and the changes in crop production added to unsettled and changing work regimes. Because the price of coffee and cotton had dropped, more planters switched to sugar, with the result that by 1823, out of a total of seventy-one plantations on Demerara's East Coast including the east bank of the Demerara River, approximately one-half produced sugar; however, this product was produced exclusively on only eleven of those plantations.²³ The coastal area of Demerara was less reliant on sugar than some other Caribbean locales, with coffee and cotton remaining important crops until 1831.²⁴ To get some idea of the significance of the changing economy of Demerara in the early nineteenth century, and hence much of the tension in the community, the colony's production of coffee dropped from 19.2 million pounds in 1810 to 1.4 million pounds in 1831, while cotton dropped from 5.8 million pounds to 400,000 pounds in the same time frame.²⁵

²² Soil depletion had resulted in an economic disadvantage for earlier sugar colonies such as Barbados. Guiana/Demerara had extremely fertile soil and other conditions helpful for crops. Cotton, in particular, had been an economic staple for some time. Historian Rawle Farley noted that keeping Guiana cotton secure provided a strong argument for not surrendering the area to the Dutch in the early nineteenth century. By approximately 1813 cotton had declined as a crop in Guiana. Rawle Farley, "The Economic Circumstances of the British Annexation of British Guiana (1795-1815)," *Revista de Historia de América*, No. 39 (June, 1955): 21-59, 25, 31-32, 56-57.

²³ Da Costa, 47.

²⁴ B. W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984): 63.

²⁵ The economy of Demerara/British Guiana was extremely complex, particularly due to complications stemming from the passage of the colony between Holland and England. Fortunes in mortgages were owed to Dutch financiers at various times, and financial investments were dependent upon whether there was peace or war. In 1814 after the Treaty of Paris numerous law suits were instituted by Dutch against English planters. Farley, 53-59. For a more in-depth explanation of economic tension in Demerara, see the entirety of Farley, "Economic Circumstances."

Judging from surnames and history, planters in nineteenth-century Demerara were of English and Dutch extraction. While historian B. W. Higman did not provide information as to literacy for slave-owners in Demerara-Essiquibo, he described most slaveholders in the British Caribbean in general as “relatively literate, even if lacking an intellectual focus.”²⁶ Most of these owners had the ambition of returning to England one day, and Higman considered that Demerara-Essiquibo, along with the Leeward Islands, had the greatest number of absentee owners. He also noted that absentee landlords were more interested in technological innovation than their resident counterparts, which were seen as having more antiquated methods and smaller holding size.²⁷ White plantation society in Demerara in 1823 would then be mostly English or Dutch, able to read and write (at least to sign their name), not invested in long-term agricultural practices or good relations with non-planters, and frequently acting as managers for owners who were absent, and therefore unlikely to have long-term concerns for the area or its inhabitants.

Differences in the experiences of slaves from various Caribbean colonies in their relationships to white owners and managers were in part due to dissimilarities in physical and economic environments.²⁸ The tremendous amount of work required by slaves everywhere in the Caribbean resulted in a highly uneven population where slaves far outnumbered masters, but without specific numbers to refer to it can be difficult to have an accurate vision of how large this difference was. Much of the information regarding slave demographics in the British Caribbean was obtained through a system of slave registration, which was considered a reliable source in many aspects, both at the time of registration and by today’s historians.²⁹ Through data

²⁶ Higman, 111.

²⁷ Ibid, 112.

²⁸ Ibid, 40. For example, the comparison of Barbados’ Bussa’s Rebellion with Demerara’s, including the multi-generational ties between slaves and white families in Barbados will be discussed further in the thesis.

²⁹ Ibid, 36.

taken from registration of slaves it is possible to obtain a sense of slave populations in the cultivated portions of Demerara, and to compare it with other populations. Information for a precise time and place is not always available for comparison. Further, populations and their make-up on specific plantations could change at any given time, and Higman noted variations in the type of information from one colony to another. All this somewhat limits the accuracy of comparisons.³⁰ In general, however, such surveys are useful sources for understanding much about the individual colonies' make-up, and due to the volume of documentation available about Demerara and the 1823 Rebellion, it is possible to gain some idea of how the slaves lived, including certain specific interactions among themselves.

After Demerara and Essequibo joined the British Empire in 1803, the slave population greatly increased with the inclusion of approximately 20,000 slaves from Africa between 1803 and 1805 (approximately one-third of the previous population), ending with the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807. Higman's estimates show that in 1810 Demerara-Essequibo's total population stood at 85,300 and in 1830 at 77,500. As the overall population declined, so too did the percentage who were slaves, which fell from 93.8 percent in 1810 to 87.7 percent in 1830, while the percentage of freed people rose from 3.5 to 8.3. The percentage of whites grew also at this time from 2.7 to 4.0.³¹ The general appearance of the Demerara population did not therefore change substantially during the twenty years prior to emancipation and the slave population remained overwhelmingly larger than that of whites. These numbers follow the general trend for the British Caribbean as there was a steady decline of both slaves and whites. There were some differences; the percentage of freedman in the Caribbean rose dramatically during this time

³⁰ Ibid, 36-37.

³¹ Higman, 77.

period – according to Higman, by 70 percent overall. In Demerara, along with Barbados and Jamaica, the increase was small: 4.8 percent for Demerara, 2.5 percent for Barbados, and 3.2 for Jamaica, compared to 20.2 for Trinidad. This substantial difference indicates that the freeing of a slave in Demerara, as in Barbados and Jamaica, was an unusual occurrence.

The following provides a generalized picture of the slave population in 1823, including sex ratios and likelihood of illness and injury among those of an age to work, which will later be instrumental in assessing the number of potential rebel slaves in Demerara. According to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, in 1823 the slave population of Demerara totalled 75,080, with 41,283 (55 per cent) being male and 33,797 (45 per cent) being female.³² Compared to others, a substantial number of slaves had been transported to Demerara from other colonies.³³ Very few, if any, as “coloured,” the contemporary term for creoles of mixed race.³⁴ By far the greater number of slaves were agricultural workers on large holdings.³⁵ The trend toward a declining slave population due to high mortality is explained in part by the diseases the slaves suffered, such as leprosy, venereal disease, rickets, yaws, smallpox, and elephantiasis. As well, disabilities from accidents such as broken bones, burns and hernias were common. Most of this misery was the result of unsanitary conditions, inappropriate apparel, and lack of footwear.³⁶

³² James McQueen, “The British Colonies. A Second Letter to His Grace the Duke of Wellington, from James McQueen,” *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 25, May 1829, 633-663, 644.:

<file:///G:/Blackwood's%20Edinburgh%20Magazine%20-%20Google%20Books.html>

³³ Higman, 80. Higman stated that of the colonies which had received slaves through intercolonial movement, Demerara-Essiquibo had received the greatest number (7,500) between 1807 and 1825.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 116. Higman does not show a percentage for 1817 and in 1832 only 2.9 percent.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 104.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 294.

While there were “sick houses” on site at plantations, they were sorry excuses for care facilities and also served as a place to put “malingering” slaves in stocks.³⁷

As some planters switched from coffee and cotton to sugar, increase in work required for this more labour-intensive crop necessitated either harder work or more slaves.³⁸ This need for more labour made it increasingly difficult for slaves to work in their own provision grounds, thus resulting in a lack of food and less surplus goods to sell. During the War of 1812, when supplies were scarce, the Fiscal in Demerara posted notice in the *Royal Gazette* that provision grounds must be “maintained on every estate” or suffer legal consequences. Yet da Costa noted that even in 1821 Governor Murray had to order inspections to make certain the orders for provision grounds were being complied with.³⁹ Such difficulties, while affecting slaves’ lives in a number of ways, reflects another way in which the urge to rebel had a connection to labour problems as their masters’ expectations for work performance negatively affected slaves’ living conditions.

On any plantation the majority of slaves were field workers and both men and women were included. These slaves had a variety of tasks, and of these, the dreaded task of cane holing was the most onerous; if the soil was “stiff” it was more difficult to dig and the crop needed to be planted more frequently.⁴⁰ Along with tedious work like cane holing, plantation slaves would have experience of various facets of plantation labour. Other tasks for sugar plantation slaves included manuring and cutting, as well as positions for mill feeders, stokers, firemen, sugar boilers, and more general unskilled labour. In Demerara bundles of cut cane were usually piled

³⁷ Da Costa, 55. For a graphic example to of how sick houses were used see John Smith’s Journal, September 10, 1822, 239.

³⁸ Higman stated that “most contemporaries were agreed that the work [on cotton and coffee plantations] was considerably less arduous [than that for sugar].” Higman, 167.

³⁹ Da Costa, 55.

⁴⁰ Higman, 163.

on punts pulled by cattle, making use of the numerous waterways to be transported to the mill. Although this made transportation easier, digging and cleaning canals, which were six feet wide and seven feet deep, fell to the field slaves as well.⁴¹ In the 1800s newer technology in processing sugar, such as the use of rollers to send cane into the business area of the mill, created further problems for slaves. Along with the danger to life and limb created by the rollers, spraying roofs as a counter-measure to the fire hazard which heat from the furnaces produced, and mixing and carrying sugar, rum, and molasses were other onerous jobs attached to the mill.⁴² Historian Justin Roberts noted that while slaves in the British Atlantic who had learned a trade were able to intermittently escape working on field gangs, they were still subservient to the needs of seasonal plantation labour.⁴³

For the white planters within the colony of Demerara, along with a hot and humid climate and infectious diseases which affected them as well as the slaves, there was a persistent atmosphere uncondusive to good relations with the colonists' home country and sometimes with each other. As in other British Caribbean locales, the British government issued orders and exercised authority that planters saw as interference.⁴⁴ Planters in the Caribbean had a reputation in England of being, as described by historian Trevor Burnard in his book about an eighteenth-century Jamaican planter, "brutal," "self-indulgent," "indolent," and "full of overbearing pride." They were virtually heads of private fiefdoms, and ignored church doctrines and legal and

⁴¹ Ibid, 164.

⁴² Ibid, 166.

⁴³ Justin Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment in the British Atlantic, 1750-1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 235.

⁴⁴ The long-running feud over the British government allowing Protestant dissident missionaries to preach in Demerara exemplifies one of these clashes between England and colonists. See da Costa, xvi, 21.

governmental authorities, and were fond of fighting.⁴⁵ Burnard describes nineteenth-century Demerara as “particularly dismal” for slaves: “isolated, atomized, usually employed in backbreaking labor, and experiencing unprecedented degrees of violence and social flux, slaves experienced desperate and uncertain lives.” As for the owners, they “did little to ease their pain, applying spiritual terror to the physical grief that slaves experienced.”⁴⁶ Planters such as those in Demerara looked barbaric to many people in England, but the planters imagined themselves to be hard-working and productive, and they claimed that their slaves were no worse off than other labourers.⁴⁷

While some slave owners in Demerara may have had philanthropic leanings and been at least somewhat sympathetic toward the betterment of slaves’ lives, at least one historian has described planters as “fortune hunters,” whose goal was to get as rich as possible as quickly as they could.⁴⁸ This aim was not without obstacles. After 1803, when the Dutch surrendered Demerara, Essiquibo, and nearby Berbice to the English, a shipping embargo, creditors (primarily Dutch) who descended “like vultures upon the harassed planters,” and crop failure caused immense trouble for planters, with problems magnified by the confusion resulting from English and Dutch language and law.⁴⁹ Compounding their worries, legal means of procuring fresh slaves from Africa ended with the 1807 British abolishment of the Atlantic slave trade,.

⁴⁵ Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, & Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) 20-21, 104-105. Burnard was describing white Jamaicans specifically, but his description is indicative of how Englishmen commonly saw planters.

⁴⁶ Trevor Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650-1820*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015): 272.

⁴⁷ Christer Petley, “Gluttony, excess, and the fall of the planter-class in the British Caribbean,” *Atlantic Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 2012): 85-106, 92. For more on attitudes toward Caribbean planters, see Sarah M.S. Pearsoll, “The Late Flagrant Instance of Depravity in My Family’: The Story of an Anglo-Jamaican Cuckold,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (July 2003): 549-582.

⁴⁸ Farley, 26. Farley was describing eighteenth-century Caribbean planters, but the description was no less astute for those in the nineteenth century.

⁴⁹ Farley, 42-43.

Trading within the Americas continued, but it was more difficult to acquire new slave labour.⁵⁰ By 1811, planters in Demerara were facing “ruinous expenses,” but in 1812 they received a bit of a reprieve via a proclamation which stayed proceedings to Dutch creditors.⁵¹ J. R. Ward notes that British Caribbean planters recovered for several years, but in the 1820s there was a depression when wartime scarcities ended and prices fell, as well as other economic adjustments which detrimentally effected profits, although plantations were still economically viable for some planters.⁵²

Tensions did not come solely from planters’ worries about profits. While the fear of slave rebellion was always present in a society which depended on coerced labour, during certain times there seems to have been more fear on behalf of white owners. Burnard, in his book, *Mastery, Tyranny & Desire*, reflects upon white Jamaicans during the latter half of the eighteenth century. The planter Thomas Thistlewood, whose journals provided Burnard with his view of British Caribbean plantation society, reflected the attitudes of much of the white population of Demerara as well as Jamaica. Burnard states that: “The foremost characteristic of white Jamaicans, therefore, was an all-consuming ambition for wealth, an avaricious and self-aggrandizing self-interest.” While the effort to achieve wealth required hard work, Burnard pointed out that this group used slaves as their means to achieve this, and that the whites were constantly on the razor’s edge of being overwhelmed.⁵³ After the successful rebellion in Saint

⁵⁰ Da Costa, 48-52; Higman demonstrated that from 1829-1832, there was a negative rate of slave increase of -14.5 and between 1822-1825 -14.3. Higman, 326. For a thorough explanation of the financial underpinnings of the colony at the time, see Farley, particularly 42-59.

⁵¹ Farley, 49, 50.

⁵² J. R. Ward, “The Profitability of Sugar Planting in the British West Indies, 1650-1834, *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 31, No. 27, May, 1978: 197-213, 209.

⁵³ Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, & Desire*, 19.

Dominique, Jamaican slaves were soon singing songs about the event and whites were worried.⁵⁴ In general, whether or not there was more to fear after the example of St. Dominique, authorities in Caribbean plantocracies were concerned to the point of paranoia about losing control. Craton explains that this allowed for any kind of deterrent conceivable; for example, decapitation with the suspected rebels' heads displayed, which Craton describes as a reflection of white masters' paranoid fears.⁵⁵

While there exists plentiful examples of planters' cruelty and indifference toward slaves, observations that Enlightenment-inspired ideas related to *liberté, égalité, and fraternité* influenced ameliorative and abolitionist sentiments and slave uprisings as a form of labour protest have been popular among historians of slavery. Christa Dierksheide describes West Indian planters' vision of a post-Enlightenment slave trade as "a commercial system with civilizing properties that benefitted all corners of the Atlantic World."⁵⁶ Amelioration was considered, by British Caribbean planters, as best approached as a gradual process -- one that abolitionists saw as too gradual.⁵⁷ As studies of improved crop yield indicated that better-managed conditions for slaves would pay off in long-term financial gains, plantation management was equated with the running of a well-tuned machine, thus resulting in improvements all around.⁵⁸ While these concepts certainly had a great impact by applying pressure to alleviate some of the conditions under which slaves toiled, Roberts has pointed out that the Enlightenment concept of progress through work and economic success also utilized

⁵⁴ David Geggus, "The Enigma of Jamaica in the 1790s: New Light on the Causes of Slave Rebellions," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Apr, 1987): 274-299, 277.

⁵⁵ Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, 187.

⁵⁶ Christa Dierksheide, *Amelioration and Empire: Progress & Slavery in the Plantation Americas*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014): 155.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 162.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 15-16.

slave labour to a horrifying extent, squeezing out production in whatever way was feasible.⁵⁹ In economically unsound 1823 Demerara, numerous examples of this kind of treatment are found, particularly within John Smith's *Journal*.⁶⁰

Slaves who escaped or rebelled against the terrible conditions of slavery in Demerara could theoretically form maroon communities. The ability of slaves in some areas of the Caribbean and mainland America to take advantage of safety offered by densely forested, difficult to navigate terrain might have been one option in Demerara. Demerara had a plenitude of such "bush", yet this was unlikely to have featured in the plans of the agitating slaves. There was already a maroon population in Demerara who generally existed without the interference of Europeans and they were not necessarily open to accepting new maroons from amongst the slaves.⁶¹ In fact, these maroons tracked and killed Quamina as he attempted to stay out of sight of the authorities during the events in Demerara. There was no mention in the Demerara Rebellion of the slaves attempting to come to an arrangement with the maroons or to set up their own community.

The statistics and observations presented above provide some idea of the basic demographics of Demerara, and they also indicate that opportunities for slaves to change their status from slave to freed person were extremely rare. The impression given is that a Demerara slave had two possibilities for improving their lot: rebel in order to overturn the society, or work from within the system to effect change. The work-related impetus for full-scale rebellion, however, could also translate into one of the major themes of this thesis: labour-related protest over ameliorative measures. Demerara's slaves lived with an abundance of illness, a minimum

⁵⁹ Roberts, 5-6.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Smith's entry for November 17, 1821.

⁶¹ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 63.

of care, and a lack of nutrition which worsened as time was taken away from working on their own crops. Considering these problems, how might this particular group of slaves see their acts of rebellion? What would be the most likely way to resolve issues, considering the near impossibility of survival in the difficult terrain beyond the plantations of Demerara and the presence of family and community within the colony itself, and when the greater number of arms available to rebelling slaves consisted of work implements like the “bill” or “cutlass” used to cut cane? The slaves may have talked about rebelling and taking over the colony, but the tremendous difficulties presented by the uneven power structure of white planters over slaves, combined with hearing news and gossip about labour protests and ameliorative measures, suggests that slaves might protest daily working conditions in a fight to reform the system from within before risking all in a rebellion to take over the colony.

The task of reassessing both the size of the Demerara Rebellion and whether it was an attempt at slave autonomy or a labour protest has relevance beyond historians’ curiosity. If it was as large as has been reported and included all the slaves on the East Coast, it would have been led by slaves who had created a remarkable organizational and communications system within an environment which was far more tightly controlled than plantation societies in mainland America. It would also have almost certainly been an anomaly for every slave to have been involved. It is important to consider the question of size as such claims may have reflected the truthfulness of witnesses and what motives they would have had for exaggerating reports, for example, as an excuse for the savagery of the white militia. A more accurate report of the size of the Rebellion could potentially give some hint as to how slaves reacted to being urged to abandon their present situation for an unknown outcome. The Demerara slaves uniting for one

specific outcome – freedom – may imply that they did not individually consider the best immediate and long-term results for themselves and their families.

CHAPTER TWO:

Demerara's Position Within the Historiography of Slave Rebellions

The Demerara Rebellion, while not garnering a large amount of scholarly interest compared to some others, has nevertheless been referenced by various historians, particularly in historiographies that address Emancipation Era uprisings, their relevance to the Haitian Revolution, and the growing influence of missionary and abolitionist groups from England. The following historiographical overview discusses several historians' viewpoints applicable to the Rebellion and its meaning within the broader study of slavery. In an attempt to understand what this rebellion meant for slaves and planters at the time, within the study of slavery generally today, and particularly slave rebellions in the Emancipation Era, I make connections between historians' theories and evidence from Demerara. Important events and personalities of the Demerara Rebellion which I consider in this chapter fit within major historiographical observations; however, as I will demonstrate in a further chapter, important details of the Rebellion seem to have been misinterpreted.

Beginning in the early twentieth century, slavery studies in general tended to follow certain schools of thought, up to and including the 1970s when Marxist theory became increasingly popular within the genre. Of these schools, W.E.B. Du Bois began a black-centric approach when he took aim at U. B. Philips's racist work *American Negro Slavery* published in 1918.¹ These schools of interpretation, which followed what De Anna Reese and Malik Simba term the "White Supremacist School," included the "Negro History School," the "Black History

¹ DeAnna Reese and Malik Simba, "Historiography Against History: The Propaganda of History and the Struggle for the Hearts and Minds of Black Folk," *Socialism and Democracy*, Vol. 25, No. 1, (2011): 13-43, 15.

School,” the “Black History Women’s School,” the “Afro-Centrist School,” and the “Marxist School.”² The Marxist School used “dialectical materialism to clarify the trajectory of racism and class oppression,” which Marxist scholars recognized as the dilemmas of race and class within the black bourgeoisie.³ Herbert Aptheker, also a Marxist historian, explored the antagonism between masters and slaves which encompassed both race and class, seeing a “class struggle in the guise of race struggle.”⁴

The significance and evolving ideas of labour equity and reform and their relationship with slavery became a popular topic in British Caribbean studies in the 1970s. Partially due to the rise of revisionist history and the retranslation and reinterpretation of certain Marxist writers, and initiated from antiwar and civil rights movements, Marxist-related historical interpretations of slavery studies were favoured by some historians.⁵ Michael Craton entitles one chapter of *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom* “Proto-Peasant Revolts? The late Slave Rebellions in the British West Indies, 1816-32,” in which he discusses the Demerara Rebellion at some length. He writes in the preface that the original article, published in 1979, was likely one of the first to make a comparison of the three rebellions, and that the rebellions represented a desire by the slaves to be “free peasants.”⁶ Eugene Genovese’s *From Rebellion to Revolution*, also published in 1979, references slave revolts and their relationship to what he called a “bourgeois-democratic” time and place and what became “semi-proletarian, semi-serf social formations.”⁷

² Ibid, 15-16.

³ Ibid, 33, 35.

⁴ Ibid, 35.

⁵ Michael Denning, “‘The Special American Conditions’: Marxism and American Studies,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1986): 356-380, 357; Jonathan M. Weiner, “Radical Historians and the Crises in American History, 1959-1980,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (September, 1989): 399-434, 399.

⁶ Craton, “Proto-Peasant Revolts”, 282-305.

⁷ Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979): xx-xxi.

In *From Rebellion to Revolution*, Genovese considers slaves' bid for freedom throughout the history of slavery in the Americas from a largely Marxist perspective, saying that the history of slave revolts "corresponds roughly to the transition from seigneurialism to capitalism."⁸ Genovese sees various stages within slave societies in the Americas, including "changing economic opportunities" and the "perceived need [by masters] to mitigate or legitimate ... exploitation," in this way supporting the idea that slaves responded to events at home and abroad.⁹ In discussing incidents during the latter part of the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries, he stresses the influence of the French Revolution and the Haitian Revolution on the ways in which slaves rebelled and their reasons for rebelling. According to Genovese, rebellions thereafter tended to look toward the ideal of liberty and equality. In his preface, Genovese notes that slaves began to see themselves as joining the dominant society "on equal terms" rather than separating from it.¹⁰ Written prior to Michael Nicholls' and Michael Johnson's works which revisited sources for specific rebellions and conspiracies, Genovese provides perspective on the Demerara Rebellion within a larger frame of what he terms the "turning point," i.e., the French Revolution and St. Domingue.¹¹ Speaking specifically of the Demerara Rebellion, Genovese describes the rebel slaves, or his proto-proletariat, as using "nonviolent tactics suggestive of a general strike."¹²

Genovese makes an argument for slave revolts as a being on a continuum within which labour protest is but one part of gaining agency. He considers what he referred to as "larger forms of struggle" (he mentions American slaves joining the Union Army and other forms of

⁸ *Ibid*, xviii.

⁹ *Ibid*, xv-xvi.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, xix-xx.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 82.

¹² *Ibid*, 35.

rebellion in Brazil) as being more likely to be successful, thereby slowly destroying slavery as a system.¹³ Demerara slaves made comments regarding having two or three days a week off, which suggests that they thought of their actions as being a protest against present conditions and what they were most likely to be successful in gaining at the time. Douglas Egerton, referencing Genovese when he says that slave revolts in the age of emancipation were part of a radical struggle for democracy in a world which still had “bourgeois moorings,” means that it may have been more correct to consider that in such rebellions bourgeois sensibility was emerging.¹⁴ This view of slave upheaval in the nineteenth century does not refute either the claim that Demerara rebels were rebels in fact or that they may have been labourers protesting their conditions, but helps enable an interpretation that both possibilities fit. Giving further weight to the argument that many slave uprisings were a form of labour protest as much as an insurrection, Craton notes in “Proto-Peasant Revolts” that “it appears that despite the whites’ imaginings, none of the rebel leaders wanted bloody revolution unless there was no alternatives [sic],” which he equated with “a kind of strike action.”¹⁵ In this, Craton makes an observation. One of the outstanding aspects of the Demerara Rebellion was the lack of white blood shed by the slaves, with written documentation of slaves telling white planters that they did not want to inflict injury.¹⁶

Jan Nedereen Pieterse, writing about the multi-faceted process of slaves’ rebellious responses to ongoing events, discusses how historians of slavery referred to various types of rebellions which had evolved according to issues encompassing the Atlantic World.¹⁷ In this, he

¹³ Genovese, 41.

¹⁴ Egerton, 633.

¹⁵ Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, 297-299.

¹⁶ See, for example, where a Mrs. Walrond is told: “We mean you no harm.” Bryant, 9.

¹⁷ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, “Slavery and the triangle of emancipation,” *Race and Class*, October, 1988, Vol. 30, No. 2: 1-21, 2-3. Pieterse used Brazil’s Palmares maroon community’s defense against the Dutch and Portuguese from 1600-1694 as one example in a broader-based argument.

uses examples such as St. Domingue/Haiti's revolution, changes in slave laws in some American states, and the outlawing of the Atlantic slave trade to identify specific types of rebellions.¹⁸ The idea of a specific type of rebellion belonging to a given time in history gave rise to a "restorationist and isolationist" category in which earlier maroon communities sought to detach themselves from white colonies, a distinct goal to be differentiated from a later "revolutionary" type of uprising.¹⁹

Following on the heels of the French Revolution, the revolt in St. Dominigue represented an inspiration for slaves or a nightmare for planters. The resulting complete independence and equality of former slaves served as a fearsome proposition to white planters who came to see a Haitian-style revolution behind any indication of slave upheaval. Certainly, this was a fear in Demerara, but two differences in particular stand out and should be borne in mind: The first is the difference in leadership. A.J. Williams-Myers noted that an earlier model of "reactionary, restorationist" leadership would not be especially appropriate in a situation such as that on the long-enslaved island of St. Domingue. In order to succeed, this model of leadership had to be "replaced or tempered" by creoles "whose angle of vision was forward-looking and mirrored the bourgeois-democratic ideology of the Age of Revolution."²⁰ In the Demerara Rebellion, the most prominent accused slave leader was Quamina, who reflected specific characteristics attributed to slave rebellion leaders, as I will demonstrate. Secondly, Haiti had a complex system of caste and class evident across the entire population.²¹ Within Demerara, there was certainly distinct animosity among the populace, both between and among classes and colours, but the

¹⁸ Ibid, 3.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ A.J. Williams-Myers, "Slavery, Rebellion, and Revolution in the Americas: A Historiographical Scenario on the Theses of Genovese and Others," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Mar., 1996): 381-400, 387.

²¹ Franklin W. Knight, "The Haitian Revolution," *The American Historical Review*, Volume 105, No. 1 (February, 2000): 103-115, 105.

very small numbers of freed slaves and mixed-race creoles in Demerara would account for the lack of evidence of the widespread class-divided antagonism as in St. Domingue.²²

Haiti's revolution appears regularly in discussions of slave rebellion, particularly in reference to the fear held by white planters all over the Atlantic world that their plantation colonies could be the next to fall to their own slaves. Yet there were great differences in situations, as well as in leadership among the colonies; therefore, a successful action for slaves would have to be relevant to the colony in question. Jeremy D. Popkin notes that the term "Haitian Revolution" connotes "a unity to the events from 1791 to 1804 and that their final outcome reflected the accomplishment of a program consciously laid out from the beginning."²³ The slave uprising had developed at approximately the same time as one by the free people of colour, but the two were not always united in their intent. For some time, it appeared that both sets of rebels supported the French, then turned against them, partly as a reaction to Napoleon Bonaparte.²⁴ The story of the Haitian Revolution is complex and broad-ranging, developing over approximately fourteen years, and is considerably different from that of Demerara, with a distinctly different outcome. Yet it is relevant to the historiography of the Demerara Rebellion in a number of ways, perhaps the most outstanding being that not only was it an inspiration to slaves throughout the colonies, but that it also raised the level of fear and paranoia among white planters. One outstanding consequence of Haiti and Demerara's rebellions is held in common: Popkin notes that as the black population of Haiti was mostly illiterate, "its history has to be written almost entirely on the basis of evidence provided by outsiders, most of whom were

²² Ibid, 108.

²³ Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012): 5.

²⁴ Ibid, 5.

thoroughly hostile to it.”²⁵ In Demerara’s case, the “outsiders” were outsiders in that they were not the enslaved and so were not privy to the greater part of the discussions and events which took place prior to the Rebellion. As such, historians cannot be certain to what extent the rebels in Demerara were patterning their actions on reports of the experiences of rebels in Haiti over two decades previously, but there is certainly evidence to suggest that the effects of the Revolution on slaves and whites within Demerara and other slave societies in the Atlantic World were present decades afterward.

Numerous historians have used the three Emancipation Era rebellions in Barbados, Demerara, and Jamaica in discussions of insurrections occurring during a time of increasing furor from England over slavery. One outstanding characteristic in common was that they were purportedly based on the suggestion that the king had declared slaves to be free while local authorities and planters suppressed the news. This was not an entirely new situation as it had been present in other rebellions as early as 1790.²⁶ In Demerara, orders had arrived from England, although they stipulated numerous ameliorative measures, not freedom from slavery as some slaves were suggesting. As I will demonstrate, slaves in Demerara were aware that the governor had received orders which would be beneficial to them, although they did not precisely know what this consisted of.

Craton discusses the phenomenon of large-scale rebellions in this Emancipation Era period as “later revolts [which] constituted a crescendo of resistance, each one more extensive, disruptive and influential than the one before.”²⁷ Craton links the three rebellions in several ways in *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom in the Caribbean*. One chapter discusses slave

²⁵ Ibid, 5.

²⁶ Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, 267-268.

²⁷ Craton, “Proto-Peasant Revolts?”, 283.

culture and resistance, particularly in regard to Christianization of slaves by Protestant missionaries.²⁸ The author explains earlier fears around slave uprisings, such as rebellious slaves taking advantage of unrest between European nations. He believes that eventually attempts to follow Haiti's example had been mostly put to rest, many slaves were by then creolized, the Europeans were at peace, and whites believed that their fear of slaves rising in a way akin to Haiti had been exaggerated.²⁹ Certainly Demerara's documentation from the time of the Rebellion does not obviously give reference to Haiti, so Craton was likely correct that by 1823 paranoia relating directly to the Revolution had lessened. Instead, most of the planter animosity was directed at the missionary, Smith, who was attempting to Christianize the local slave population.

Craton gives credence to the individuality and sophistication of slaves, particularly those in leadership roles, comparable to "contemporary proletarian movements in Europe."³⁰ Further, he expresses his opinion that the slaves active in pre-emancipation uprisings were not likely looking to overturn the economy at the time. Within "Proto-Peasant Revolts," Craton references the Demerara Rebellion as being a part of this pre-proletarian movement and suggests that not enough attention had hitherto been paid to the role of rebel leaders. Craton notes that during this time of Emancipation Era revolt, a new type of rebel leader had surfaced, that of a skilled, articulate, often literate slave with "new, infinitely more practical, aims [than previous African restorationists]," who were "at least [as] sophisticated as the leadership of contemporary proletarian movements in Europe," who considered a broader world-view.³¹ Documentation

²⁸ Craton, "Slave Culture, Resistance and Emancipation," in *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, 263-281.

²⁹ Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, 264.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 297.

³¹ *Ibid*, 297.

bears this out, as the individual personalities of slaves like Quamina and Jack Gladstone emerge, each with strong communication skills but differing in how they communicated with contemporaries, as well as in their approach to the rising disquiet in the colony.³²

Craton acknowledges slave society's changing environment in the nineteenth century. He encourages historians to investigate and understand specific points upon which slaves could base a protest. In noting the changes which planters had generally missed in their slaves' appreciation of their situation, Craton argues that planters tended to only see rebellious slaves as wilfully destructive.³³ He suggests that white planters had been "conditioned" to seeing this violence in rebelling slaves, citing Bryan Edwards; however, two decades after Edwards expressed the view, Bryant quoted some planters whose estates had been breached by rebelling slaves, revealing that the slaves' stated a desire not to harm them.³⁴ The focus on white fears of destruction of personal property and sexual violence kept planters from seeing the other influences which were at issue for the slaves. Craton explains, in more simplistic terms, the arguments which Genovese raised around the same time regarding "mercantilist and industrial phases of capitalism," as well as ideas of non-Marxist historians, historians of ideas, and "idealist historians." This particular work of Craton's holds slave rebellions as a many-branched study,

³² For an example regarding Quamina wherein he questions Smith about the "paper" which the Governor held, see Smith, *Journal*, July 20, 1823, 333-335; regarding Jack, see various slaves' testimony in Colonial Office, Britain, Schedule "F," *Further Papers*, 21.

³³ Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, 295.

³⁴ Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 3rd ed, 3 vols (London, 1801): iii, 36, as quoted noted in Craton, *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom*, 295. See, for an example of planters' claims, Bryant, 9, 31, 32. In some instances, Bryant notes that planters were put in the stocks and left; however he tends to focus on what I later refer to a "fevered" retelling of the uprising, emphasizing more violent actions.

an approach which shows up in da Costa's work some years later wherein she follows various avenues to provide a more complex narrative of the Demerara Rebellion.³⁵

Recently, historian Gelien Matthews has contributed to the historical connections between Caribbean slave rebellions and abolitionists, noting the Demerara Rebellion as an example.³⁶ She mentions a number of branches of study, some of which have been previously discussed, but allows for a greater potential of convergence of influences to affect the moments when major rebellions occurred. For example, although other historians have mentioned particular female protagonists in rebellions, such as Barbados' Nanny Grigg, she brings specific attention to the potential of female slaves having a role in uprisings.³⁷ Her description of the various facets of rebellion addresses the connection between slaves and labour protests; she relates a plan by Jamaican leader Sam Sharpe for slaves to refuse to work until they were paid wages.³⁸ An important idea which Matthews brings to the investigation of slave rebellions is that, as she expressed in the introduction to her book: "Revolts must be regarded as significant historical experiences beyond the confines of the local plantation."³⁹ Slave rebellions reached beyond the local plantation to challenge society's *status quo*, effecting change in more than the slaves' and planters' lives. Matthews uses the example of abolitionists who, being generally respected within Britain, believed that gaining freedom for slaves "necessitated working through normal political and judicial channels."⁴⁰ Eventually, as rebellions occurred, abolitionists came

³⁵ For an overview of trends of materialist historiography versus idealist, see Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Karl Marx's Contribution to Historiography," *Diogenes*, Vol. 16, No. 64 (December, 1968): 37-56; Craton, "Empire, Enslavement and Freedom," 295-296

³⁶ Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

³⁷ *Ibid*, 45.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 45.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 27.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 16.

to view them as a necessary part of working toward slaves' freedom, thus challenging the earlier middle-class religious ideas prevalent among abolitionists.⁴¹

In 2017, historian Randy M. Browne explored ways in which slaves in the British Caribbean may have worked from within the system of slavery to better their situation, "better" being a relative term considering the state of misery most slaves inhabited in the nineteenth century.⁴² In order to sustain themselves and their families in an extremely one-sided situation, Browne considers that they "[prioritized] survival rather than freedom."⁴³ Browne's theory somewhat reflects the earlier observation made by Craton where he suggests historians investigate points upon which slaves could base a protest. In this method of investigation Browne acknowledges the tremendously uneven power differential within a slave society. He bases his study on records from the colony of Berbice, near Demerara. Within the system in Berbice, slaves were able to make complaints about excessive and unfair treatment and be heard by a magistrate. Although these complaints often came to naught, Browne shows that they nevertheless made for some eventual improvements and chiseled away at the uneven power balance.

Although there were some differences in the history and politics of the two colonies, Browne's theories seem to be very relevant to Demerara. This is particularly so in light of a reading of John Smith's *Journal* in which Smith provided many anecdotes about various slaves and their helplessness in the face of inhumanity on the part of planters. Similar to Matthews' view regarding slaves' comprehension of trends in the greater world and of laws within the

⁴¹ Ibid, 26-27.

⁴² Randy M. Browne, *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

⁴³ Ibid, 194.

colonies, Browne emphasizes the slaves' resourcefulness in attempts to work within the means available to them. While these attempts did not always immediately succeed, they sometimes resulted in an improvement in living conditions, or at the very least, forward momentum toward a more equitable situation by having a slave's case heard and noted by a governmental authority.⁴⁴ In Demerara, aggrieved slaves often brought their troubles to Smith, seeking his advice, although he was usually unable to offer more than spiritual consolation. The Rebellion, with its emphasis on the "paper" from Britain which contained changes to the slaves' situation, seems to have been for some of the slaves a way of signifying that planters were dependent upon their labour and that they expected masters to follow rules as laid down by higher authorities in Britain.

In the historiography of slave rebellions, recent scholarship has led to a closer examination of primary sources. Nicholls', Johnson's, and Sharples' re-examinations of reported slave conspiracies and rebellions has raised questions about what is understood of various incidents. Their findings of exaggeration by contemporary whites and later historians indicate the importance of modern historians' re-examinations of primary sources for misreadings and misconceptions. In 2001 Johnson published an article about the Denmark Vesey Conspiracy, the story of a free black who had, in 1821, apparently plotted with others to burn Charleston, South Carolina, kill all the whites, and free the slaves, whereupon the former slaves would then head for Haiti and a new life. This had been an accepted story for years until Johnson decided to revisit the sources, throwing into question what had been established as the defining historical narrative. He suggests that historians had not been careful enough in the reading of witness

⁴⁴ Ibid, 186.

testimony.⁴⁵ In his article, Johnson provides examples of other instances of historical misrepresentation through lack of thoroughness.⁴⁶ Johnson also points out areas in which the Denmark Vesey incident was affected by human error which was not given sufficient account in earlier studies.⁴⁷ He explains that he came to the conclusion that “almost all historians have failed to exercise due caution” in reading court testimony in the case, and that members of the court had their own reasons for making it appear that there was conspiracy where there was none.⁴⁸

Similarly, in an in-depth study of Virginia’s Gabriel’s Conspiracy of 1800, Nicholls proposes to challenge a previously accepted narrative of the incident. In this case, he explains that nearly 100 years after the conspiracy, a “history buff” and active member of the Virginia Historical Society named William Price Palmer decided to make a study of the sources.⁴⁹ Palmer had some obviously racist assumptions about the area’s inhabitants, including that “the negro” was normally docile but unstoppable once aroused.⁵⁰ Such attitudes toward slaves, and that white masters were too lax, coloured his impressions of the years leading up to Gabriel’s Conspiracy.⁵¹ The greater part of another century passed before the documentation was re-examined in detail when Egerton, in 1993, published a book largely devoted to the plot, *Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802*.⁵² Egerton used the primary evidence about Gabriel’s Conspiracy to challenge the prevailing earlier viewpoint centered on racist assumptions. Nicholls re-examined the sources, taking a slow and careful

⁴⁵ Johnson, 915-916.

⁴⁶ See, for example, *ibid*, 954.

⁴⁷ See, for example, *ibid*, 964.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 916.

⁴⁹ Nicholls, 2-4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 3.

⁵² *Ibid*, 6.

approach, concluding that “key points of Egerton’s interpretation were built more on the shifting sand of suppositions than on the hard rock of archival evidence.”⁵³ Nicholls also cites Herbert Aptheker (*American Negro Slave Revolts*) and Winthrop Jordan (*White Over Black*) as historians whose insufficiently thorough explorations of documents resulted in them reporting “unreliable” and “inflated” numbers about the rebellion.⁵⁴

In a further example of recognizing white assumptions about slave conspiracies, Jason Sharples argues that the planter élite held certain ideas about Barbadian slaves’ conspiracy to rebel in 1816. He describes how whites feared that slaves would essentially step into the roles of their white masters, supplanting them after a successful rebellion.⁵⁵ Sharples explains how a terrified informant slave would give those investigating the conspiracy basically what they expected and that whites would “speculate” about possible violence rather than actual violence.⁵⁶ Sharples notes Johnson’s work regarding the Denmark Vesey plot and how it led to his questioning whether in some instances slaves really intended to rebel or if this was a perception of whites or even a possible “fabrication by politically motivated judges.”⁵⁷ In Demerara, as I will demonstrate, slaves did join together to protest their situation, but what scholars have written about the Demerara Rebellion has been powerfully shaped by the paranoia of the planters and the colonial élite. The possible exaggeration of the scale of the Rebellion may have come about in an attempt to excuse white actions in suppressing it.

Historian Wim Klooster notes that the difference between how events occurred and how they were reported afterward could be a product of the way in which news was transmitted: “In

⁵³ Ibid, 9.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 5.

⁵⁵ Sharples, 811

⁵⁶ Ibid, 811, 814.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 817.

the days when most news was spoken, it was hard to distinguish it from rumors.”⁵⁸ While this can explain misunderstandings of situations at the time, Klooster also points out that psychologists have remarked that such rumours can speak to circumstances relevant at the time and allow for a more in-depth inquiry. This is bound up with the common rumour in the Demerara Rebellion, among others, that an order had come from the King which freed the slaves. Klooster provides examples of colonial authorities going to great lengths to avoid the knowledge of certain events being carried by rumours to slaves; Demerara’s governor attempted this himself by refusing to officially address orders from Britain until he was forced into it by the advent of the Rebellion.⁵⁹ Klooster noted that prior to the Haitian Revolution it was reported that in August of 1791 a slave announced that slaves had been granted “three free days per week – a variation on the theme of full freedom,” and that there was evidence of rumours in the Caribbean from 1669 onward that slaves had been declared free, thus reflecting that both possibilities were not new to the Demerara Rebellion.⁶⁰

Rumours and their effect in slave rebellions have certainly been considered by other historians, but Klooster examines the source of rumours and their transmission, highlighting the place in slave society from which the rumours were produced or carried. He notes that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Caribbean offered more scope for slaves’ “wishful thinking” than earlier eras.⁶¹ Klooster’s article reflects how common and how powerful rumour was. There is, however, another possibility to consider: did statements made during and after the Demerara Rebellion and which were not based upon documented facts affect how the

⁵⁸ Wim Klooster, “Slave Revolts, Royal Justice, and a Ubiquitous Rumor in the Age of Revolutions,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 71 No. 3 (July, 2014): 401-424, 404.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 404-405.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 411, 413.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 416, 418.

narrative continued to be related? Klooster provides “a few examples in which the rumor hung around long after the uprising had been prevented or suppressed,” and further that “the rumor must have been transformed into a tale, a narrative that became part of the folklore of those places, known to untold members of each community.”⁶² In her work on rumour and history in colonial Africa, Luise White writes of oral history as a source of historical context. The importance of oral history and its impact on later hearers of the story is relevant to the questions considered here. She notes that “part of what made hearsay so reliable to those who repeated it was that it could resolve some of the confusions that experience actually contained.”⁶³ The suggestion that earlier examinations of sources which may have misrepresented occurrences and did not consider the ongoing effect of rumours is well worth exploring in an inquiry into slave rebellions. There is always a distinct possibility in the telling of any story, and particularly one where there is a great deal of action and confusion, that the story could change over time depending upon who tells it and how it is heard by others.

Historian Mary Reckord demonstrates that there could be more than one ideology behind each individual slave rebellion or movement to improve slaves’ situation.⁶⁴ Writing about the 1831-32 rebellion in Jamaica, Reckord points out that there were two strains of thought for achieving the slaves’ goals, one being that slave leader Sam Sharpe said that the original plan had been “mass passive resistance” and not armed rebellion, while the second group had awarded themselves military titles and planned to lead a regiment against the whites, while claiming that the idea had come from Sharpe.⁶⁵ Reckord states that the greater number of estates

⁶² Ibid, 416.

⁶³ Luise White, *Speaking With Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): 34.

⁶⁴ Mary Reckord, “The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831,” *Past & Present*, No. 40 (Jul., 1968): 108-125, 112.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 113-114.

affected in this particular rebellion were neither part of a military-style plan, nor were they organized into a labour protest, indicating the possibility that many of the slaves involved in an uprising had not been present in the planning stages and joined in as part of a general desire for betterment.⁶⁶ As in Demerara, in Jamaica it was not unusual to find churches entwined with the labour movement and in connection with slave uprisings. Reckord notes the close affinity of Protestant sects and labour movements, using the example of a group known as the Primitive Methodists which “identified their church so closely with the trade union movement as to make it practically a labour religion.” This complexity of Christian connections, although not solely connected to Methodists, along with labour rights and competing ideologies was borne out in the Demerara Rebellion as well, as I will demonstrate as being part of the documented history and lore surrounding the event, in which John Smith’s affiliations with the London Missionary Society and his lower-class origins play a significant part.

Evangelical missionaries’ presence in the British Caribbean, their effect on literacy for slaves, and their importance in interpretations of slave rebellions by their contemporaries and later historians, as well as other roles in Caribbean history, cannot be understated, particularly in regard to Demerara.⁶⁷ Historians such as Mary Turner have written extensively about Caribbean slavery and the effect of Christianity on the institution, particularly regarding the connection with abolitionists in England and planters’ fears of slaves’ understanding of a gospel which stated that white and black were brethren. Her book, *Slaves and Missionaries*, examines the interactions

⁶⁶ Ibid, 119.

⁶⁷ See, for example: Robert Worthington Smith, “Slavery and Christianity in the British West Indies,” *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, Vol. 19, No. 3, (1950): 171-186; Olwyn M. Blouet, “Earning and Learning in the British West Indies: an Image of Freedom in the Pre-Emancipation Decade, 1823-1833,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 2, (191991): 391-409; Christa Dierkscheide, “Missionaries, Evangelical Identity, and the Religious Ecology of Early Nineteenth-Century South Carolina and the British Caribbean,” *American Nineteenth Century History*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (March, 2006): 63-88.

between the enslaved and British missionaries beginning in the late eighteenth century.⁶⁸ Turner notes 1783 as being the year in which Quakers had presented a petition to the British Parliament for the abolishment of the slave trade, and agitation for the end of slavery in general was becoming commonplace.⁶⁹ She also states that the rising movement against slavery “threatened both the planters’ livelihood and the very structure of West Indian society,” and that in England and the Caribbean the movement begun by the Quakers became a political battle.⁷⁰ The Emancipation Era rebellions culminated in the 1831-32 Jamaican Baptist War, during which Turner identifies Christianity as having become a “political force” which was used by rebellious slaves as a “revolutionary ideology” while the missionaries were apparently unaware of the connection.⁷¹

There was a distinct divide, both in Britain and in the British Caribbean, between the Protestant dissenter sects and the established Church of England.⁷² British missionary societies often worked without official state backing; this meant that missionaries outside of the Anglican church did not receive state protection and could end up at odds with authority figures in the colonies.⁷³ As well as arguments for the amelioration and eventual emancipation of slaves, there were movements in England toward more egalitarian rights for lower-class labourers and other issues. Within evangelical Protestant ministries were non-élite members who were former labourers. These were generally young men, with basic education, who chose to attend seminary

⁶⁸ Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 5-6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 6, 7.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 148-149.

⁷² Neil J. Smelser, *Social Paralysis and Social Change: British Working-Class Education in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 58-60.

⁷³ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Volume 2 The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985): 306-308.

training, often with a view to doing missionary work. The connection between Christian proselytizing and emancipation has received a great deal of attention in studies of the Demerara Rebellion, possibly to the detriment of a fuller understanding of a complex situation. This as has been evidenced by the centrality of the preacher, John Smith, to the Rebellion's history, including repeated references of the rebels' connections to Bethel Chapel, over which Smith presided.

Patricia J. Rooke notes that the attitudes of evangelical missionaries regarding race were, "for want of a more historical term, ahead of their time."⁷⁴ A large part of the antipathy of planters toward missionaries was in regard to advancing slaves' literacy. The slave-owners' attitude was that educating slaves, who were essentially seen as property, would inevitably lead to trouble.⁷⁵ Although most missionaries ardently opposed slavery, those who opposed slavery itself and others who supported the institution agreed to stress the "Moral Qualifications" of good servants and slaves through teaching the Gospel.⁷⁶ While missionaries believed in giving slaves the opportunity to read the Bible, planters saw threat in slaves' ability to read not only the Bible's potentially inspiring messages, but other materials which might turn up in a busy port.

Within the historiography of slave rebellions, studies on the effect of ameliorative measures have been used in conjunction with assessing the potential for labour-related actions and in theories such as Browne's which focus on slaves using the system within which they were trapped to effect improvements. Between the states of slavery and total emancipation lay attempts to ameliorate the conditions of the enslaved, and these lay at the heart of the Demerara

⁷⁴ Patricia J. Rooke, "Evangelical Missionaries, Apprentices, and Freedman: The Psycho-Sociological Shifts of Racial Attitudes in the British West Indies," *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 1-2, March 1, 1979: 1-14, 1.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 1-2.

⁷⁶ Craton, "Christianity and Slavery," 149-150.

Rebellion. Rather than an abrupt end to the institution of slavery, or as Christa Dierksheide described, “the jarring, disruptive social change of the French and Haitian revolutions,” amelioration sought to improve the lives of slaves.⁷⁷ Dierksheide characterized ideas of amelioration as an effect of the Enlightenment wherein slaveholders tried to “recast these institutions as modern, ‘natural,’ and civilizing” wherein the ways in which social change could be accomplished met the ideals of Enlightenment thought.⁷⁸ According to Dierksheide, in a world which still possessed an evident social hierarchy, there was a belief that owning slaves came with moral obligations, but such improvements were oftentimes made with the idea of preserving the institution of slavery. In a separate article, however, Dierksheide pointed out that ameliorative ideas, as missionaries presented them, were received differently between a mainland American colony such as South Carolina, and a British Caribbean colony like Demerara.⁷⁹ The idea of amelioration was not only entrenched as a potential remedy for moral conflict and enlightened ideas for social change. Also inherent was the idea of maximizing the output of plantations, so that particularly in mainland America, ameliorative measures were seen as an all-around improvement to society.⁸⁰

The sugar plantations of the Caribbean reported higher rates of mortality and lower rates of fertility than the self-sustaining slave population of mainland America.⁸¹ In an effort to produce such slave populations, ameliorative measures could be engaged as a method of increasing birth rates while reducing the rate of mortality on the notoriously labour intense sugar

⁷⁷ Dierksheide, *Amelioration and Empire*, 11.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 11.

⁷⁹ Christa Dierksheide, “Missionaries, Evangelical Identity, and the Religious Ecology of Early Nineteenth-Century South Carolina and the British Caribbean,” *American Nineteenth Century History*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2006): 63-88, 63-64.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 13, 15.

⁸¹ Herbert S. Klein and Stanley L. Engerman, “Fertility Differentials Between Slaves in the United States and the British West Indies: A Note on Lactation Practices and Their Possible Implications,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (April, 1978): 357-374, 360-363.

plantations of the Caribbean. Amelioration was seen as a positive turn by two distinct groups: one saw these measures as a movement toward eventual emancipation, while the other saw the resulting improvement in slave production and reproduction as a support for continuing enslavement. Reports of increased harvests and improvements in slave numbers were used as fuel for anti-abolitionist arguments; two separate estate owners' reports from St. Vincent were used extensively in campaigning for the pro-slavery faction just prior to passage of the Slavery Abolition Act.⁸² Whether or not ameliorative measures were meant as a means to ease the conscience of slaveholders while resulting in better profits or as a step toward a goal of emancipation, the objective was improvement of the conditions of slaves.

There were significant differences in how amelioration was received by American planters and their Caribbean counterparts. Winthrop Jordan pointed out that when, in the American South, punishments became less brutal and treatment of slaves somewhat more benevolent it served to anchor slavery more firmly in plantation society as it became more acceptable to those who would oppose it otherwise. In the Caribbean, matters were somewhat different as slavery continued in its unmitigated brutality: “[British Caribbean slavery] ... helped doom itself by its notorious cruelty.”⁸³ The British government set out reform proposals which included regulation of punishments, abolishing the flogging of women, encouragement of marriage among slaves, and discouragement of the separation of family.⁸⁴ Mary Turner clarified that orders such as these and, in particular, an attempt to abolish Sunday markets which then left time for the slaves to attend religious services, angered the colonial planters as they interpreted

⁸² S. D. Smith, “‘Not that of mere accident, but of humane treatment’: Natural increase and ‘amelioration’ on Grand Sable Estate, St. Vincent,” *Continuity and Change*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2018): 117-144.

⁸³ Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro 1550-1812*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012): 368.

⁸⁴ Turner, 104.

such attempts as a “sly ensnaring policy of the King’s ministers.”⁸⁵ Similar attitudes are mirrored in the events leading to the Demerara Rebellion via the suppression of ameliorative measures and the mistaken belief that the ameliorative legislation from the metropole contained orders for emancipation.

While slaves in Demerara heard messages of empathy in the context of Christianity and, as the gossip around a letter from the Colonial Office showed, they also heard about concerns in England about their situation. It is also possible that they may have heard about ideas regarding increased production connected to their daily labour conditions. The idea of amelioration, while ostensibly to improve the conditions for slaves, was also rooted in a belief that a better environment would result in higher yield. Justin Roberts noted that Enlightenment thought had given “rise to a new set of moral sensibilities that reduced some of the physical barbarity within slavery and ended the slave trade,” but that there was a “ruthless rationalism ... that helped foster ... more exhausting plantation work regimes.”⁸⁶ Yet these ameliorative measures, whether they helped or hindered slaves, also may have provided potential for slaves to apply pressure, particularly if they were aware of the potential for increased production. By pressuring the planters in general and the governor in particular, the slaves of Demerara may have used the situation of the governor’s obstruction of new ameliorative laws to uncover new possibilities which they could exploit for improvement within the existing system rather than an attempt to overthrow a colony, potentially resulting in vast destruction.

The role of punishment was an important part of the “paper” from England which stipulated new regulations around its use in maintaining Demerara’s plantations, and has been a

⁸⁵ *Jamaica Journal*, July 12, 1823, 193, as quoted by Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 104-105.

⁸⁶ Roberts, 6.

recurring theme in the historiography of slavery in general, sometimes with particular emphasis on Demerara's exceptionally cruel regime.⁸⁷ Used as a way to enforce more productive labour, and to coerce and claim mastery, whippings and confinement in the stocks were daily occurrences. Slaves could make complaints and they would periodically refuse to work in protest over what they saw as managers and owners not giving them their "rights." Even in a situation where the ultimate authority was in the hands of white masters, actions on the part of slaves show that they saw slavery as being a "system of reciprocal obligations" wherein their work was exchanged for certain commitments on the part of their masters.⁸⁸ Africans had some experience with slavery, whether having been one or observing the workings of the institution in their home country. While there were variations depending on where they came from, they had understandings of the "proper" behaviour of slaves, and certain expected behaviours of their masters toward them.⁸⁹ While admitting that the written evidence is "scant," Emilia da Costa describes these expectations as an "unspoken contract" in which slaves were given time to work on their own crops, time for meals, an allowance of appropriate food, and other amenities.⁹⁰ The mixture of cultures, languages, and social groups thrown together as slaves resulted in what da Costa describes as "threads [unravelling] in many directions to be rewoven again in different ways."⁹¹ In nineteenth-century Berbice, Browne describes the "limited legal rights" that slaves achieved within the institution of slavery.⁹²

⁸⁷ See Burnard, *Planters, Merchants & Slaves*, 272 quoted previously.

⁸⁸ Da Costa, 73.

⁸⁹ Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987): 29.

⁹⁰ Da Costa, 72-73.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 74.

⁹² Browne, 5.

The idea that slaves and ameliorationists both sought to make improvements within the institution of slavery does not negate the idea that slaves would rather be free. Rather, it shows that slaves were aware of current events and had the sophistication to see alternatives to a bloody rebellion. Whether the Demerara Rebellion was a revolt for freedom or more closely resembled a labour-related protest as discussed by Craton, Genovese and others, should be examined in relation to the “paper” issued by the British government and held by Governor Murray for approximately seven weeks before the slaves rose. As slaves’ lives were forcibly bound to the workforce of plantations and in Demerara were given very little time for rest, less food than they needed, and more work than they could do, virtually every measure given to improve their conditions was related to labour in some way. Their identity, to the white planters, was that slaves *were* the labour. Slaves’ attitudes and actions toward their situation could vary in many ways, particularly regarding their concerns for partners, parents, and offspring as well as their own lives. Burnard expressed this predicament by noting: “Slavery was less an existential condition than a predicament that slaves coped with in different ways, sometimes to their advantage, sometimes not.”⁹³ By protesting the lack of action on adopting ameliorative measures such as those set out in the orders which Governor Murray held, slaves agitating for better daily working conditions by demanding that stipulations set out by the British government could be held as an example of exploiting the system in which they were trapped. The Demerara rebels, by taking actions that they were capable of carrying out for a time, (e.g., keeping planters and their families locked up at home and unable to go for help while they petitioned the governor) can be seen as reflecting Craton’s idea of a proto-proletariat attempting to work with the materials at hand, namely the orders from Britain. The real violence, including killing, began

⁹³ Burnard, *Planters, Merchants & Slaves*, 272.

when it was both suspected by whites and announced by some slaves that there was an all-out rebellion in progress.

CHAPTER THREE:
The Pulpit, The Planters, and the Slaves:
Complex Relationships

For two centuries, the events that occurred in Demerara in 1823 have been referred to as a “rebellion”; however, to apply such a simplistic label diminishes the meaning of the events. Slave rebellions were a source of terror for planters and colonial government in plantation societies, and a rumour of such an occurrence, with slaves vastly outnumbering whites, could and did result in white panic and violent retribution. When an incident occurred, a standard narrative which incorporated whites’ deepest fears of black rebellion often resulted. In an attempt to fill a gap where historical narratives about slavery were mostly presented from this type of white viewpoint, some historians have perceived slave uprisings as a united front among the slaves showing solidarity (rather than the planters’ viewpoint of a mob focused on destruction).¹ Evidence of a more complex narrative on the part of slaves indicates that for some, their actions reflected protests over labour conditions and attempts to reform those conditions from within the institution rather than all-out rebellion.

Stating that slaves in Demerara rebelled in the cause of total emancipation oversimplifies the incident and misses other important aspects of the Rebellion in the longer historical view. There is abundant evidence that some slaves were taking matters into their own hands to force the governor to implement new ameliorative measures, rather than attempting to take over the colony. Demands made by defiant Demerara slaves which fit into themes of labour unrest or rebellion are an important feature of the uprising, as are white expectations, paranoia, and lack of acquiescence to amelioration. Michael Craton, Emilia da Costa, and others have written

¹ For example, Craton’s narrative of the Demerara Rebellion in *Testing the Chains*, 267-290, does not emphasize the potential for more than one initiative.

character portrayals of the main participants in the Demerara Rebellion, and while they offer valuable insight, it is necessary to be familiar with the materials from which these portraits were formed in order to have a genuine and thorough understanding of both the sources themselves and previous historians' appraisal of them. A knowledge of specific characters and actions by those living in Demerara also assists in understanding the relationships between the people who were most involved with the Rebellion and how those relationships may have affected their behaviour. This includes assessing whether this was indeed a full-scale rebellion and how specific people would likely have viewed the slaves' actions, including the slaves themselves.

According to documentation regarding the white inhabitants, it is evident that individual white planters and officials were not in agreement on many things except for the need to control slaves. While lacking in frank statements directly attributable to Demerara slaves, sources do reveal great differences between slaves and their relationships with one another and white inhabitants. This becomes fully apparent when reading transcripts of the trial which followed the Rebellion as well as some of the secondary sources, but is most especially seen in the *Journal* of Reverend John Smith, who with his deacon, Quamina, bore the lion's share of the blame for the uprising and eventually became known as martyrs and heroes despite the Rebellion's failure. Without direct evidence of slaves' thoughts, individuality in personality and opinions should be fully considered, and all the documentary evidence pertaining to locale, people, and the time period in question should be evaluated when working toward an understanding of this particular rebellion.

The tensions within Demerara prior to the Rebellion were not confined to pro- and anti-slavery groups, profits, or even potential slave uprisings. There were rifts between individuals within the colony which indicate that high-ranking officials, including the Governor, were

beholden to the good graces of certain planters. The British government had admonished the Governor for various reasons, as well as being inundated with objections over transfers of funds, and there were endless complaints from missionaries and their home office in England over lack of support from the colony's officials. The weight of this evidence becomes apparent when its effects are seen during and after the Rebellion as court testimony brought out the ongoing feuds between individuals, both slave and free, and makes it apparent that there were distinct factions among the locals. To believe that the slaves, many of whom were members of Smith's chapel, were not aware of the in-fighting and uneasiness among the white populace seems unreasonable. Therefore, there is plenty of scope for suspecting that the unease helped contribute to a situation ripe for a slave insurrection.

There were rifts within the colony just before and after the Rebellion. The sources suggest a convoluted dispute over payments made through certain government officials to various residents of Demerara which were considered to be out of order by other members of the local government. This had transpired over a number of years, beginning shortly after the English takeover and the resulting admixture of laws and tradition.² Arguments over the legalities of remittances to colonists were not the only source of friction, some were intensely personal. One of the most obvious rifts involved an ongoing feud between the Governor and the President of the Courts of Civil and Criminal Justice, which provides a sense of the atmosphere of Demerara within the years 1816-1823, as well as raising questions of how responsible the

² His Majesty's Privy Council, Britain. *Report of His Majesty's Most Honourable Privy Council, in the case of William Rough, Sergeant at Law, Late President of the Court of Criminal and Civil Justice, Demerara, Complainant, against John Murray, Esquire, a Lieutenant-General in His Majesty's Forces, Late Lieutenant-Governor of that colony, Respondent.* (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, Paternoster Row, 1825: 23-26. *Slavery, Abolition & Social Justice, Demerara and Essequibo, Miscellaneous Vol. 5, Letters and Papers Mr. Stephen, 37-77.*

Governor and his immediate circle was.³ Taken as an example of one of the situations the Governor became entangled with, the legal battle between Governor Murray and Sergeant-at-Arms William Rough illustrates the potential untrustworthiness of the Governor and his willingness to expedite matters relating to his governorship of the colony, as well as the way in which one of the local newspapers reported events in order to please Murray.

In 1814 Lieutenant Colonel John Murray had been appointed Governor of Demerara, and the colony was united with nearby Essequibo soon after with Murray thereby becoming Governor of the united colonies. In early 1816, a man named William Rough was given the post of President of the Courts of Civil and Criminal Justice for Demerara and Essequibo. An argument over fees and executive powers arose between the Governor and Rough, stemming from the Dutch and English hybrid nature of Demerara's laws. In October of 1821 Murray fired Rough from his post and Rough sued the Governor. The charges which Rough levelled against Murray included publishing illegal proclamations against Rough and neglecting to forward to the Colonial Office orders and correspondence regarding the situation, among other accusations. The charges filled three and one-half pages under the headings of "I Misgovernment; II Oppression, by reason of Office; [and] III Conspiracy."⁴ Rough's counsel stated that Demerara's "colonial newspaper, under the license of the Governor, commenced a fixed and violent attack against its legally constituted authorities ... seeking private gain from public inconvenience ... sowing and cultivating therein the seeds of anger and malice."⁵ It was further charged that upon his suspension from office Rough's private books and papers were seized and "that a rowdy

³ *Ibid*, 37-77.

⁴ *Ibid*, 23-26.

⁵ *Ibid*, 31.

procession had arrived at his house and chalked an effigy of Rough being hanged.”⁶ In his Address to the Privy Council, Rough’s agent made it clear that in his client’s view, Governor Murray was, along with several others, up to his neck in schemes to seize as much influence, power, and financial gain as possible.⁷ The case was finally settled before the Privy Council in England in 1825. According the *Dictionary of National Biography*, it was settled in favour of Rough; however, from official transcripts it is not clear in whose favour the case was settled.⁸ In general, the episode did nothing to enhance the Governor’s reputation and, indeed, adds to the list of suspect motives behind some of his actions at the time of the Rebellion.

The eldest son of a high-ranking British military man, Murray represented a set of complicated and intertwined issues in Demerara and had a vastly different upbringing than his future nemesis, John Smith. Murray, in addition to having a high-ranking position as an officer serving the British Crown, had the difficult task of governing the for-profit enterprise that was Demerara while staying on the good side of his neighbours. He was also a class snob, as da Costa describes: “Education had always been a privilege to the upper classes, a badge of status, and Murray saw a risk in extending the privilege to other social groups.”⁹

John Murray was not only the governor of the colony, he was also a plantation owner and thus had financial interests in crop production and slave ownership, as well as a need to be on good terms with others for the advantage of the planter class. As former Demerara resident, Reverend John Wray, had suggested, it appears that Murray was afraid of losing the planters’

⁶ Ibid, 63.

⁷ Ibid, 26-103. For the gist of the argument, see pages 26-41.

⁸ Sidney Lee, ed. “Rough, William,” *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 49 (London: Smith Elder & Co., 1897). [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Rough,_William_\(DNB00\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Rough,_William_(DNB00)). All available accounts end with the notation from June 1, 1825 that the verdict had been reached and notice had been sent to Rough’s agent, without stating what that verdict was. See *ibid*, 328.

⁹ Da Costa, 97, 98.

esteem, and as was stated in correspondence regarding the law suit between Rough and Murray, he had put himself in a position to be bullied by a fellow plantation owner.¹⁰ It appears that Murray simply lacked the judgement and qualities required in a colonial governor. He was dogged by legal problems and had received nine unspecified “admonishments” by the British government.¹¹ After the news of Smith’s death in prison arrived in England, Murray was recalled and never received another post, apparently a rare feat for a colonial governor. Historian Phillip Buckner said of colonial governors that even in cases of stupidity or misconduct they were unlikely to be recalled.¹²

A member of Governor Murray’s circle, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone, whose name appears a number of times in correspondence to and from the Colonial Office, and quite prominently in the Rough case, possesses an interesting reputation in this historical narrative, as well as being an intriguing example of a Demerara planter and someone with a dubious relationship with Murray. Cochrane-Johnstone was the son of the Earl of Dundonald and was a Member of Parliament until his appointment as Governor of Dominica in 1794. During the course of his life he was convicted of Stock Exchange fraud and eventually lost his plantations in Dominica to his creditors but re-established himself on a coffee plantation in Demerara. During the early nineteenth century, First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord St. Vincent, in speaking of Cochrane-Johnstone and his brothers, said, “The Cochranes are not to be trusted out of sight, they are all mad, romantic, money-getting and not truth-telling – and there is not a

¹⁰ The National Archives CO 111_43, Demerara and Essiquibo 1823, Miscellaneous Vol. 5, Guyana Association; *Slavery, Abolition & Social Justice*, 100: <http://www.slavery.amdigital.co.uk.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/Contents/ImageViewerPage.aspx?imageid=178615&let=D&pi=1&prevpos=177446&vpath=Default>.

¹¹ Da Costa, 168.

¹² Phillip Buckner, “The Colonial Office and British North America, 1801-1850,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 8, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 1985: http://admin.biographi.ca/en/special.php?project_id=49&p=36.

single exception in any part of the family.”¹³ A letter to the Colonial Office dated 30 December, 1823 states that “the Governor has allowed himself to be bullied by that swindling vagabond Cochrane-Johnstone.”¹⁴ This summation was likely true, but evidence in his biography and correspondence with Lord Bathurst indicates that Cochrane-Johnstone was likely also an individualist unafraid to pursue his own course, and would take a stand for what he believed in, such as the welfare of troops, and the mismanagement of slaves, in stark contrast to many of the other planters.¹⁵

In 1813 seeds of the turbulence between planters and missionaries which would result in the Rebellion were planted when English missionary, John Wray, who as living in Demerara accepted the offer of a parish in the neighbouring colony of Berbice. Wray had lived in Demerara since 1808 in charge of Bethel Chapel at plantation *Le Resouvenir*, which was owned by a Dutch planter, Hermanus Hilbertus Post. Post was somewhat of an anomaly among Demerara planters in that he was greatly concerned with giving religious instruction to his slaves and had written to the London Missionary Society requesting a missionary for his plantation. Although Post was supportive and optimistic toward Wray’s task, Wray experienced problems from his early days in Demerara from planters who were worried about the idea of all people as

¹³ R. Thorne, ed., Honourable Andrew James Cochrane-Johnstone, *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1790-1820* (Suffolk, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 1986):

<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/cochrane-%28afterwards-cochrane-johnstone-%29-hon-andrew-james-1767-1833>.

¹⁴ Charles Shand, Letter to the Right Honourable William Huskisson, The National Archives CO 111_43, Demerara and Essiquibo 1823, Miscellaneous Vol. 5, Guyana Association; *Slavery, Abolition & Social Justice*, 100: <http://www.slavery.amdigital.co.uk.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/Contents/ImageViewerPage.aspx?imageid=178615&let=D&pi=1&prevpos=177446&vpath=Default>.

¹⁵ R. Thorne, ed., Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone, *History of Parliament On-line*; Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone, Petition to Earl Bathurst, October 5, 1823, The National Archives CO 111_43, Demerara and Essiquibo 1823, *Slavery, Abolition & Social Justice*, Demerara and Essequibo 1823, Miscellaneous Vol. 5, Letters and Papers J, 214-228.

<http://www.slavery.amdigital.co.uk.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/Contents/ImageViewerPage.aspx?documentid=177446§ionid=178744&imageid=178746&vpath=Default>.

brethren according to the Christian gospel.¹⁶ An excerpt from a letter from Wray to the London Missionary Society (“LMS”), to which he belonged, appears to have been a particularly astute observation and somewhat of a forerunner of further trouble: “It is the opinion of these gentlemen that the Gospel will ruin the colony; of the governor I had a better opinion, but he appears to be afraid of losing their esteem.”¹⁷ The ongoing harassment, continual struggle, and aggravation seemed to have amounted to diminishing returns for Wray and in 1813 he left for Berbice, but his experiences with Governor John Murray were a taste of what was to become commonplace in Demerara as the years passed.¹⁸

Bethel Chapel lay unoccupied for awhile, eventually welcoming its new parson, labourer turned preacher, John Smith. Smith’s background helps explain his sympathetic relationship with the slaves, as being privy to intimations of why the slaves planned to rise, and as the only *bona fide* point of contact between slaves and white authority. Smith was from a lower-class artisanal family, originally trained as a cabinet-maker, who had some sort of religious awakening during his late teens. Historians are fortunate in having Smith’s *Journal*, the Debate in the House of Commons regarding his fate in 1824, and correspondence between Smith and members of the LMS. These documents, in which we can hear Smith’s own voice, as well as the voices of associates and officials who were both for and against his missionary work, build a multi-dimensional image of Smith which provides insight into white fears and expectations, as well as slave agency. After training in a seminary he was sent to Demerara only somewhat aware of the dangerous strain between the planters and the missionaries. The planters feared slaves’ increasing ability to read and disseminate abolitionist literature and a resulting increase in their

¹⁶ Wallbridge, 16-17.

¹⁷ London Missionary Society, incoming letter from Reverend Wray, May 8, 1808, as quoted in Da Costa, 90.

¹⁸ Wallbridge, 19.

confidence through Christian teachings. The missionaries, who wished to bring literacy to the slaves as well as Christian messages, had been warned by their superiors in the LMS to be very careful of what and how they preached. They were told not to insinuate that rebellion in any form against their masters was to be considered.¹⁹ Planters' fears that slaves would hear of the exodus out of Egypt and use it as inspiration for a rebellion were plainly evident during trial.²⁰

Smith began to notice potential trouble from the planters within ten days of arriving. A slave described as a carpenter working at *Success*, and who may have been Quamina, approached Smith to inform him that some of the neighbourhood plantation management were coming to the Chapel in disguise in order to satisfy themselves as to whether Smith was preaching anything which might make the slaves dissatisfied with their lot.²¹ At the same time, Reverend Wray, who had come to visit and advise Smith, attempted to see the manager of *Le Resouvenir*, Mr. Van der Haas. The manager was not at home, but he soon sent a note stating that if Wray came to his house again, Van der Haas would "turn him out." Through such attitudes Smith was quickly learning how impossible it was to build any sort of bridge with the planters. This hostility continued in trial testimony that made Smith out to be a leader of the Rebellion, while establishing that the officials in Demerara were highly reactive.

A close reading of John Smith's *Journal* is essential in a study of the Demerara Rebellion for a number of reasons. Because he was the only white man implicated and sentenced to death

¹⁹ Da Costa, 4.

²⁰ The National Archives, CO 111/42. Demerara and Essequibo 1823 – Vol. 4, Major General Murray's despatch No. 249 Proceedings of Court Martial against Missionary Smith, 80-106: <http://www.slavery.amdigital.co.uk.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/Contents/ImageViewerPage.aspx?documentid=177444§ionid=177445&imageid=178165&let=D&pi=1&prevpos=177444&vpath=Default>.

²¹ Smith, *Journal*, March 15, 1817, 3. Sending informants to Bethel Chapel was not relegated to the early days of Smith's tenure. In July of the following year Smith noted that there was a white person in attendance who was probably a spy watching for an example of "what they call here 'the principles of revolt.'" *Journal*, July 17, 1818, 59-60.

for encouraging the slaves to rebel through his influence as their parson, his death in prison outraged the British public; thus, he has always been the foremost figure in the incident. His *Journal* is also useful for supplying detailed descriptions of places, people, and events in the years prior to the Rebellion. As the *Journal* includes impressions and descriptions by someone who was present during events significant to the Rebellion, most of the following information will be taken from that particular source.

There is a short journal entry within a week of Smith's arrival in 1817 which would prove to be a significant feature of the Rebellion and trial: "Had a Prayer Meeting in the Chapel. Quamina & Romeo 2 Negroes prayed. I was much pleased with the affected simplicity of their prayers."²² While historians are able to tell a great deal about Smith, thanks to the documented evidence of his life, we are not so fortunate with the man who became his chief deacon and with whom he shared notoriety for starting the Rebellion, arguably being as much the "Demerara Martyr" as Smith. As is the case with most slaves, Quamina's personal voice is absent; however, there were witnesses to some of his conversations, Smith mentions him numerous times in his *Journal*, and his fate was recorded by witnesses and government officials.

Quamina resided at plantation *Success*, next to *Le Resouvenir*, which was shown to be the starting point for the insurgent slaves, and the source of those charged and punished for being its most influential leaders. At the time of the Rebellion, Quamina was a mature man. Born in Africa, he had become interested in Christianity, displaying his intelligence through difficult-to-answer questions for the former chaplain, Reverend Wray.²³ He fit the ideal of a leader of slaves: hard-working, capable, respected, competent, and skilled in his profession as a carpenter.

²² Smith, *Journal*, March 14, 1817, 3.

²³ Da Costa, 104-105.

He experienced severe punishment in 1812, being beaten by the then manager of *Le Resouvenir*, Van der Haas, to prevent him from making the formal complaint to the Fiscal to which he was entitled.²⁴ After his first month of preaching, Smith appointed five deacons, including Quamina and the above-mentioned Romeo of *Le Resouvenir*. Quamina became a trusted source of information about the slave community and da Costa wrote that John Smith and his wife, Jane, “came to trust Quamina’s wisdom and admire his piety.”²⁵ While this description of Quamina’s abilities and the trust he engendered in the white missionaries is admirable, it also describes the sort of slave paranoid white authorities feared. Quamina was killed before he could be taken into custody and made to testify, but there are records of his conversations and actions. This serves not only as a counterpoint to damning testimony of at least two white élites (Murray and McTurk), but also as a strong example of a slave who showed forethought and consideration in understanding what slaves were rising for. Quamina’s character and demeanor and how they reflected a leadership ideal which may have been based in reality or were the product of white expectations are discussed more fully in a comparison of accused leaders of rebellions.

Evidence indicates that planter Michael McTurk deliberately instigated planters’ hostility against missionaries. He shows up throughout the years 1817-1823 as having an odd fascination with Smith and an obsession with denying comfort to slaves. He was a physician who graduated from the University of Glasgow (and is still today lauded in their history, despite historians such as Craton treating his memory with utter contempt), who chose to become a planter and physician in Demerara.²⁶ In Craton’s words, he was a “quack doctor, manager, and hated

²⁴ Ibid, 145-146, 181-182, 116.

²⁵ Ibid, 145.

²⁶ University of Glasgow, The University of Glasgow Story, People, Michael McTurk, Biography: <https://www.universitystory.gla.ac.uk/biography/?id=WH14301&type=P>; Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 270.

taskmaster of Felicity plantation, justice of the peace, burgher captain, implacable enemy of Parson Smith and his slave congregation, and Quamina's huntsman in September, 1823."²⁷ Long before Craton wrote his opinion of McTurk, the planter was spoken of by Sir James McIntosh during the House of Commons debate of 1824 regarding the Rebellion, in which he references the treatment which Smith had suffered via McTurk:

What is it to us that a misunderstanding occurred three or four years ago between Mr. Smith and a person called Captain or Doctor MacTurk [sic], whom he had the misfortune to have for a neighbour; ... the generous MacTurk; who, having had a trifling difference with his neighbour five years ago, called it to mind at the moment when that neighbour's life was in danger. Such is the chivalrous magnanimity of Dr. MacTurk. If I were infected by classical superstition, I should forbid such a man to embark in the same vessel with me. I leave him to those from whom, if we may trust his name or his manners, he may be descended; and I cannot help thinking that he deserves, as well as they, to be excluded from the territory of Christians.²⁸

McTurk and Smith first met in seemingly amiable circumstances, but sometime afterward the planter seems to have become fixated upon Smith.²⁹ The physician instigated events later recounted in the trial, and as Burgher Captain it was he who ordered Smith's arrest. His harassment of Smith and his influence as Murray's adviser provides insight into the causes of the uprising and provides examples of sadistic treatment toward slaves which are not directly related to issues of labour fairness. Evidence shows that McTurk and Governor Murray used Smith in an attempt to dodge any suggestion that they had mismanaged the slaves and thus the government of the colony.

McTurk found excuses to portray the missionary as being a bad influence on the slaves and of using his position for personal gain. In October 1819 Smith was told that McTurk had claimed the "parson made the negroes give him money to pray for the sick," and therefore they

²⁷ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 270.

²⁸ House of Commons, *Debate*, 91-92.

²⁹ Smith, *Journal*, June 16, 1817, 17.

were not to go to the Chapel as a result.³⁰ As unlikely as this sounds, McTurk's accusations were used to damn Smith during his trial as a way to shift blame for the Governor's and other planters' actions. What had occurred was that Smith was taking subscriptions for the Missionary Society and it was primarily the slaves who gave, despite being the least able to afford it. This incident, which resulted in considerable testimony at trial, may imply that slaves rebelled over general inhumane and senseless treatment, as reflected in a misguided accusation by McTurk about Smith's integrity, and not about specific labour issues. Two days after this journal entry about donations, what would turn out to be one of the most cruelly manipulative stunts played out by McTurk began its first phase and reveals indications that McTurk was trying to manipulate Smith, while also indicating that his reliability as a medical expert and reliable citizen pointed to him being unsound, much less being a reliable witness to the Rebellion.

In 1819 Van der Haas was still the manager at *Le Resouvenir*, although he would be replaced by Hamilton. He wrote to the planters in the neighbourhood warning of a smallpox outbreak on that plantation and that none of the neighbouring slaves should go to Chapel. At catechism the next day the slave and deacon, Quamina, said that most people in the area had already had smallpox and that those who had not would have obtained immunity through being exposed to cow pox. Three people had been diagnosed with smallpox and were removed to a "house" at the back of the plantation.³¹ Three weeks later the Fiscal ordered the Chapel closed to slaves from any other plantation until the smallpox was no longer found among them. Smith blamed McTurk for this decision and observed that although "it is well known" that smallpox was still prevalent, the planters did give their slaves written permission to go the Sunday

³⁰ Ibid, October 26, 1819, 140.

³¹ Ibid, October 28, 1819, 141; October 31, 1819, 142.

market.³² The situation served McTurk and his cronies as a manipulative tool to cause more trouble for the missionary and congregation, while still benefitting from slaves' attendance at the market.

In his diary, Smith referred to the small building in which the sick slaves were kept as a "hovel" and was surprised that those sequestered there were not all dead due to the deplorable conditions. McTurk finally made a visit, declared the slaves cured (although one had a "locked jaw"), and sent them home, whereupon he burned the hut and their clothing.³³ Weeks passed, as did notes between McTurk, plantation managers, and Smith. The situation continued until the end of January 1820, some fifteen weeks after it had begun.³⁴ McTurk continued his campaign, even disturbing Smith and his wife by getting his slaves to dig a trench just outside the Smiths' door.³⁵ It is difficult to understand exactly why McTurk would exert time and effort on this kind of maneuvering and pettiness. The most likely reason is that McTurk, being greatly paranoid of and opposed to slaves obtaining any advantages, harassed Smith and the slaves and, in effect, held them as hostages. He used his position as a physician to keep them from their meeting place at the Chapel and displayed his power to make decisions on behalf of the colony's governor. Not long after the Chapel was once again open to slaves from other plantations, evidence of McTurk's influence over Governor Murray's weak character began to exert itself.

Shortly after the smallpox situation had been resolved, Smith and his fellow missionaries experienced ongoing problems with Murray, and by extension, McTurk, resulting from an effort

³² Ibid, November 21, 1819, 146.

³³ Ibid, November 29, 1819, 157-158; December 8, 1819, 149-150.

³⁴ Ibid, January 29, 1820, 163.

³⁵ Ibid, December 25, 1819, 153; December 31, 1819, 155; January 1, 1820, 156; January 12, 159-160; January 29, 1820, 163. McTurk openly displayed more of his obnoxious behaviour when the following year a missionary named Mr. Mercer was ill. He asked Smith to write to Dr. McTurk for his advice. McTurk refused. Ibid, January 3, 1821, 190.

to accommodate the large number of slaves who wished to attend chapel. The seemingly endless attempts to gain the Governor's approval for a larger building provide confirmation of Murray's unreliability and tendency to bend to the will of planters such as McTurk. Smith and others had for some time been attempting to obtain land upon which to build a new and bigger chapel. Two missionaries named Davies and Mercer had also applied to the Governor for permission to occupy a part of a Company path (as the passageways between plantations were known) that lay near plantation *Clonbrook* for building a chapel. The Governor said that planters had "very serious complaints against the missionary already on the coast at *Le Resouvenir*," but he would make enquiry into these circumstances and if there was no "just cause of complaint" would allow the building and even intimated that he would contribute toward it. On September 13, 1822 Smith mused in his *Journal*, regarding the Governor, that, "policy may induce him to make a show of friendship in some cases and to some individuals."³⁶ It seems that Murray was paying lip service to the missionaries and their supporters who included the influential LMS Directors back in England, but had no real intention of helping the missionaries. Murray continued to avoid a firm stance and to display an inability to make a positive declaration on one side or the other. For weeks the Governor used excuses for not meeting with Smith or stating whether he would give his approval or not. Smith would wait two hours for Murray before being told that he had left for the day, he had not yet had time to consider the petition, that he had not yet decided, that he had forgotten about it, and then that Murray had given Smith's petition to McTurk to prepare a report, a rather one-sided source of advice given that "McTurk is one of the greatest enemies to the instruction of the Negroes on the whole coast."³⁷ This episode is one example of Murray's lack of skill in governing; however, the worst indication of his

³⁶ Smith, *Journal*, September 13, 1822, 290.

³⁷ *Ibid*, September 3, 1822, 288; September 11, 1822, 289-290; September 13, 1822, 290.

mismanagement was likely his delay in responding to orders from England for ameliorative measures for the slaves.

The accounts relied upon by historians such as de Costa and Craton in describing interpersonal relationships in Demerara up to the actual uprising lean heavily on Smith's *Journal*, particularly noting incidents where masters ran up against missionaries and slaves, and which were later specifically noted as fuel for the Rebellion. Much of the animosity between the two groups, as reflected in the *Journal*, began earlier, from at least the second decade of the nineteenth century. The livelihood of a plantation owner or manager in Demerara was somewhat precarious as fluctuating sugar prices, high rates of mortality among slaves, labour shortages, and the eventual intimations from Britain of change to the *status quo* regarding slavery took their toll on planters' confidence in their business ventures.³⁸ The notion of Christianizing and teaching literacy to slaves was unpopular among the majority of Demerara planters; they feared slaves knowing too much of the world and of spiritual matters.³⁹ The slaves, however, gathered in large numbers and were hopeful for the afterlife. As Smith noted with pleasure: "Many of the people are diligently inquiring the way to heaven."⁴⁰ White planters, for the most part, saw Christianity as having a bad influence on slaves because it provided the tools for literacy and the idea of equality between black and white, at least in the eyes of God.⁴¹ Eventually, the animosity between planters and missionaries, most specifically Smith, combined with false rumours, paranoia, and attempts to excuse poor governmental management would fuel the fire (at least figuratively) that resulted in the Demerara Rebellion and what has become the accepted narrative

³⁸ Da Costa, 26, 28-29; Matthews, 36-39. See also discussion regarding 1811 orders and rumours of freedom in 1823, da Costa, 174-178.

³⁹ Wallbridge, 23-24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 24.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 17.

about it. Specific incidents in which the Governor and planters (particularly McTurk) did everything in their power to thwart any attempts to treat slaves fairly eventually became issues at trial in 1823, years after they had originally occurred.⁴² In fact, a decade earlier the same issues which the slaves protested in 1823 were present – working on Sundays and not having time to take care of their needs. An important message was also revealed years before by Bethel Chapel’s original parson when he stated that the Governor was somehow in thrall to some of the planters.⁴³

Sources of animosity for rebellious acts by the slaves and which provide argument for considering the Rebellion a labour movement for better daily work conditions show up early on in the *Journal*: the work hours of slaves, the seemingly arbitrary rules under which they lived, and the ease with which owners and managers ordered floggings, whether for an obvious reason, or, as Smith put it, to “vent their spite on the Negroes.”⁴⁴ As in any plantation society, the general cruelty toward slaves and the denial of their freedom would make rebellion understandable, but labour complaints specific to local conditions in Demerara are specifically indicated within the first few months of Smith’s arrival and during his tenure.⁴⁵ Other examples of ongoing belligerence of particular planters who were key figures in what amounted to being the catalyst for the Rebellion or being the hated management in a labour dispute are evident. Before long, planters complained about the late hours of meetings at Bethel Chapel, yet

⁴² John Murray, The National Archives, CO 111/42. Demerara and Essequibo 1823 – Vol. 4, Major General Murray’s despatch No. 249 Proceedings of Court Martial against Missionary Smith, 80-106: <http://www.slavery.amdigital.co.uk.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/Contents/ImageViewerPage.aspx?documentid=177444§ionid=177445&imageid=178165&let=D&pi=1&prevpos=177444&vpath=Default>.

⁴³ London Missionary Society, incoming letter from Reverend Wray, May 8, 1808, in Da Costa, 90. From this letter it appears that Wray had misgivings about Governor Murray’s predecessor.

⁴⁴ Ibid, May 4, 1817, 10.

⁴⁵ See, for example, ibid, April 21, 1817, 8, which notes the long hours when sugar was being processed; also, March 29/1918, 68 regarding the “severity and cruelty ... for every little offense” with which slaves were punished.

according to the parson, because of the amount of work the slaves were expected to do, they could not start before 8:00 p.m., although they tried to conclude before 9:00 p.m., particularly on weeknights.⁴⁶ The situation illustrates another example of planters reinstating their mastery by denying the slaves the simple pleasure of a church meeting and labour-related injustice by causing them to work longer hours than that which had been stipulated years before during Wray's tenure.⁴⁷

The arguments over Chapel meeting times and rules regarding when and for how long slaves worked might be seen as reflecting a labour issue or one indicative of general cruelty to be rebelled against. Despite orders to the contrary, planters often made slaves work on Sundays, resulting in them being unable to attend services.⁴⁸ In January 1819 the Governor had been very displeased to learn that Smith had informed the Directors of the LMS in England that the planters were making their slaves work on Sunday. The Fiscal sent a letter to Smith asking for proof of a certain planter's regularly breaking this rule.⁴⁹ Smith noted in his *Journal* that it seemed strange that he should be expected to prove "what nobody in the colony denies," insinuating that the Fiscal was deliberately trying to create difficulties for Smith.⁵⁰ At certain times there was extra work in the boiling houses and on cotton and coffee plantations when the crops were being harvested.⁵¹ Despite plausible reasons, from the planters' perspective, for keeping the slaves

⁴⁶Smith, *Journal*, August 21, 1817, 27.

⁴⁷ Da Costa, 119.

⁴⁸ For a further explanation of the situation regarding slaves allowed time off, see: The missionary Smith: substance of the debate in the House of Commons on Tuesday the 1st and Friday the 11th of June, 1824, on a motion of Henry Brougham, Esq. respecting the trial and condemnation to death by a court martial of the Rev. John Smith, late missionary in the colony of Demerara: with a pref. containing some new facts illustrative of the subject. (Great Britain: Parliament. House of Commons. London Missionary Society, 1824): The missionary Smith <http://www.loc.gov/resource/list.059>: xlii (p. 36-37 printed).

⁴⁹ Da Costa, 45.

⁵⁰ Smith, *Journal*, January 28, 1819, 105; January 31, 1819, 105-106; February 2, 1819, 107.

⁵¹ Ibid, February 12, 1819, 108, 109.

working extra hours, the fact remains that they were being denied spiritual solace, community life, and time off on Sundays as they had been allowed from 1772 by the Dutch government.⁵² Any actions taken as a direct result of this, including those which did carry a threat of a complete armed take-over of the colony, can be validly considered connected to labour matters and a protest for better working conditions.

Numerous tasks that were arduous physically were expected of slaves and yet considered by masters as being outside of their jobs for plantation profits. Some of the Demerara slaves had to walk seven or eight miles every week to collect the week's supply of food, which often included two bundles of plantains, weighing, in Smith's estimation, at least fifty-six pounds. This and other required labour, such as working on the inside of their quarters (often large unpartitioned buildings where eight or ten families would live) was considered by masters as work for the slaves themselves, and therefore something which was done on their own time. Neither were slaves given time on Saturdays for going to market; it therefore had to be done on Sundays.⁵³ The slaves missed Chapel, a disappointment to themselves and a source of pure frustration for their parson.⁵⁴

Other types of unfair and inhumane treatment were certainly a cause for rebellion, yet they were less directly involved with protests over specific labour conditions. Exchanges between slave and master which resulted in punishment noted by Smith usually had a religious theme, but were at base about control of the work force. Hamilton, the manager at *Le Resouvenir* who replaced Van der Haas, flogged slaves who went to Chapel even though it was

⁵² Rules such as not being required to work on Sundays except in emergencies originated in 1772 with the Dutch *Rule on the Treatment of Servants and Slaves*. Da Costa, 44-45.

⁵³ Smith, *Journal*, February 12, 1819, 108-111.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, February 12, 1819, 109-110; March 7, 1819, 115.

located on their plantation. Planter Hugh Rogers complained of the insolence of some of the slaves – when he flogged some of them for attending Chapel they told him “that he might kill the body, but could not kill the soul.” Early in 1823, Smith was speaking with one of McTurk’s slaves who informed him that “Dr. don’t like us to know God. One time he hears me say ‘God knows’ and he said ‘Oh you know God, do you’ and he made me eat the soap he was washing with, and gave another boy a horse spur and made him spur me because I know God.”⁵⁵ There were the usual instances of physical punishments such as beatings or being put in stocks, but there were also more underhanded ways of being cruel. In February 1819, a Mr. Cumming complained about Smith marrying slave couples. Cumming justified this as a grievance because it would teach the slaves that their owners should not separate families by selling or hiring them out.⁵⁶ These instances of what appears to be the result of a vicious nature on the part of planters were also the result of what historian Mary Turner referred to as “a many-faceted political problem” for slave owners via the influence of missionaries.⁵⁷ In this respect, she cited the large population of slaves which overwhelmingly outnumbered whites, missionary sects such as the Wesleyans who were upsetting the social order with their preachers from the working class, and the resulting fears that this would result in slaves who would see themselves as equal to their masters. Some planters like McTurk and Murray would see as an upsetting of the social order by having preachers from the lower classes present. This would undermine the social order when they complained to officials on behalf of the slaves or attempted to gain more facilities for preaching; however, the greatest fear around missionary work was that it was the source of literacy for slaves. Daniel, who passed news of the “paper” from Britain to Jack and the other

⁵⁵ Ibid, December 27, 1822, 314; September 10, 1822, 288-289; January 27, 1823, 323-324.

⁵⁶ Ibid, February 11, 1819, 108.

⁵⁷ Turner, 8.

slaves, had apparently read it as it sat on Murray's table. Despite speaking of events in England and the colonies which related to Demerara within hearing of slaves, when slaves raised complaints or questioned planters' authority, it was the missionaries they blamed for educating the enslaved, without considering that the slaves themselves were able to form their own assessments of a situation.

For over a decade, records show that the colony of Demerara was an area influenced by underlying distrust and animosity among various white colonists. While the primary focus of the planter class was profit and the control of their labour force, that of missionaries was to provide spiritual leadership to the slaves. The suspicion and hostility of the planters resulted in harassment of preachers, including blocking the expansion of physical space for worship and coming to the chapel in disguise to assess whether a parson was preaching against slavery. Planters such as Post, who supported the Christianizing of slaves, were seen as upsetting society and operating against the planters' best interests.⁵⁸ Certain influential planters, such as Governor Murray and McTurk, who were also representatives of officialdom in the colony, played particularly virulent roles in making difficulties for the missionaries, with a large measure of class prejudice against these representatives of Protestant dissenter sects and labourers.⁵⁹ Adding to the always present tension, missionaries like Reverends Smith and Wray, with their working class origins and antipathy toward the maltreatment of slaves, were part of a growing number of people gaining more power in England, including from certain highly-ranked individuals such as Wilberforce. The influence of these groups and individuals on the British government amplified

⁵⁸ Wallbridge, 17-18. See also Da Costa, 88, where she noted that some Demerara colonists called Post "a fool and a madman" for introducing missionaries to the slaves.

⁵⁹ Smelser, 58-60; Da Costa, 16-19.

fears among the planter class that any economic and social stability they had was in peril.⁶⁰ This is borne out in the various incidents which occurred between planters and missionaries, the connections between the Governor and McTurk, and the long-simmering resentment between planters and slaves, all of which are seen in the narrative of the Rebellion itself, as told by three different sources.

⁶⁰ Da Costa, 19.

CHAPTER FOUR:

The Demerara Rebellion and Bussa's Rebellion: Assessments and Commonalities

Since historians lack unhindered accounts of rebellions by the slaves, they are well aware that only one side of the story is being told. Yet there is a further problem in that white expectations of and paranoia toward slaves has influenced stories of slave uprisings from the time they occurred to the present day even for those attempting an unbiased account. The three major slave rebellions which occurred in the British Caribbean in the two decades preceding emancipation -- Barbados (1816), Demerara (1823), and Jamaica (1831-1832) -- have been linked by contemporaries and modern historians to rumours of emancipation heard via reports from Britain, and there are clearly parallels among them. Such events have been generally referred to as "rebellions" in which the suggestion of an armed takeover by slaves is implicit. While there had been even earlier incidents in the Caribbean in which the rumour of freedom granted by a monarch was involved, the three rebellions within the two decades preceding emancipation appear to have much in common and are often joined together by historians. The following sets out the events leading directly to and taking place during and after the Demerara Rebellion. I will assess these event as to how the event fits within historians' views of slave uprisings of the era. I also present a brief comparison with Barbados' Bussa's Rebellion, reports of which had much in common with those of the Demerara Rebellion. The similarities in these reports, provided by white planters and officials, may point more towards consistencies in white fears and paranoia than the motives of the slaves involved.

In May 1823, the King-in-Council approved resolutions respecting ameliorative measures for Caribbean colonies' slaves, which, if not attended to, would be enforced by the British

government.¹ The first and most critical of these disallowed the flogging of women and the use of the whip in the fields. Orders which made manumission more likely, encouraged religious instruction, marriage and family, and ended separation of families were later dispatched.² The first order arrived in Demerara in early July where the Court of Policy discussed it, but were in a state of indecision for another six weeks (although it is unclear what could be decided when they were orders from England). Unsurprisingly, household slaves overheard whites discussing the situation, and a servant of the Governor's named Daniel, who admitted to reading Murray's papers, either overheard discussion or read the orders received and informed the slave Jack Gladstone, son of Quamina. Gossip and rumour soon altered the contents of the orders to be that the King had announced that the slaves were to be freed, which was a not-uncommon thread throughout slave rebellions, and was present in all three Emancipation Era uprisings.³ It is not surprising that such rumours began, as the very fact that the Governor was keeping the correspondence under wraps signified to the slaves that the changes must be important. While the lead-up to and discussions about the possibility of Rebellion took weeks to gain traction after the rumours of new laws began, it appears that the actual rising occurred quickly, lasted a short time, and then was put down. The plans for the Rebellion were finalized on Sunday, August 17, just one day prior to the rebels going into action.⁴

Although it was weeks before the hunt for accused rebels and martial law ended, the active rebellion itself lasted only the better part of two days. Rebellious slaves had armed themselves, and militia and regular army troops attempted to contain what they feared was a

¹ Da Costa, 178.

² Ibid, 178.

³ Klooster, 401-402.

⁴ Da Costa, 196-197.

complete upset which would destroy the colony and do great harm to the planters and their families. Exploring the movements of rebels and troops may provide a better understanding of the significance of the Demerara. Such an exploration may also provide clues as to the numbers of slaves and plantations involved, and provide examples of how the story was told directly after the events occurred, which influenced later histories of the event. This may in turn have some bearing on what became the dominant narrative of the story, whether it reflects what later writers have communicated, and if documented evidence supports the commonly held narrative. I have relied on mainly three sources in this narrative, from Joshua Bryant, Governor Murray, and Reverend Edwin Angel Wallbridge.⁵ Bryant, artist, writer, and friend to the Demerara planters, published *Account of the Insurrection in Demerara* in the year following the Rebellion and dedicated it to Governor Murray. This publication supplies the most detail of the three sources used. Not surprisingly, given Bryant's role as portrait artist and client of the Demerara élite, this version was highly flattering to the Governor and the Demerara militia and military who acted to suppress the uprising. Examples of Bryant's paintings of plantation scenes show Demerara as a colourful, bucolic setting of neat and orderly roads, fields, and buildings (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2). His illustrations of the Rebellion and its aftermath, on the other hand, are grim and rendered in black and white (see Figure 4.3). In the narrative, Bryant's descriptions of the militia and regular troops, the Governor, and other white planters reflect orderliness, courage, and other attractive qualities among the whites, while his descriptions of the rebel slaves indicate savagery

⁵ Joshua Bryant, *An Account of an Insurrection of the Negro Slaves in the Colony of Demerara, Which Broke out on the 18th of August, 1823* (Georgetown: A. Stevenson, at the Guiana Chronicle Office, 1823). <https://archive.org/details/accountaninsurr00bryagoog>; Murray, John. *Major General Murray's Despatch No. 249, Proceedings of Court Martial against Missionary Smith*. CO 111/42, Demerara and Essequibo 1823 – Vol. 4, 80-106: The National Archives, Kew, England. Consulted in: *Slavery, Abolition & Social Justice*: <http://www.slavery.amdigital.co.uk.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/Contents/DocumentDetails.aspx?documentid=440188&prevPos=440188&let=D&vpath=Default&pi=1>; ; Wallbridge, Edwin Angel. *The Demerara Martyr: Memoirs of the Rev. John Smith, Missionary to Demerara*, (Charles Gilpin: London, 1848): <https://merrick.library.miami.edu/cdm/ref/collection/scbooks/id/10139>

and chaos, much like his artwork. I have chiefly used Bryant's version because of its detailed descriptions and its helpfulness in visualizing the movements from plantation to plantation, and what occurred at each significant point along the way. Comparing this publication against other documentation, Bryant provided a fairly clear vision of how many plantations were affected, what physical damage was done, and how numerous the participants, white and black.

Figure 4.1. *A Rainbow Over a Plantation* by Joshua Bryant.



Source: www.spanglefish.com/slavesandhighlanders/index.asp?pageid=367216
Original in John Carter Brown Library.

Figure 4.2. *The Approach to a Plantation* by Joshua Bryant.



Source: www.spanglefish.com/slavesandhighlanders/index.asp?pageid=367216
Original in John Carter Brown Library.

Figure 4.3. *Five of the Culprits in Chains as they appeared on the 20th of September, 1823* by Joshua Bryant.



Original in the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University

Original in John Carter Brown Library.

Source: www.spanglefish.com/slavesandhighlanders/index.asp?pageid=367216

In its explicit detail of conversations, geography, and movements of rebels and troops, Bryant's version goes some way toward understanding the actions of the insurgents and what they hoped to achieve; however, a comparison with other sources helps highlight discrepancies. Governor Murray's despatch to Earl Bathurst of the Colonial Office, which describes early actions Murray and others engaged in when informed an uprising was imminent, provides a check for statements made by Bryant and his contributors made after the fact.⁶ This despatch would naturally not betray any ill-advised actions on the Governor's part, but in its straightforward military style without embellishment it seems not to contradict any other source. Over twenty years later, Reverend Edwin Angel Wallbridge of the LMS published *The Demerara Martyr: Memoirs of the Rev. John Smith, Missionary to Demerara*, in which he addressed the Rebellion as seen through the eyes of abolitionists, along with the continuing story of Christianization within the colony in the years following the Rebellion. Wallbridge wished to set straight any confusion around Smith's role, some of which had younger blacks believing that Smith had "made plenty of the black people to be hanged."⁷ Wallbridge's rendition is primarily an homage to Smith and included a great deal about the significance of scripture. The important point in using all three sources, beyond filling in some missing details, is checking to see if one in any way contradicts another. Except in insignificant details, all appear to agree as to number of militiamen, regular troops, plantations involved, and slaves implicated in specific actions.⁸

⁶ Murray, John. *Major General Murray's Despatch No. 249, Proceedings of Court Martial against Missionary Smith*. CO 111/42, Demerara and Essequibo 1823 – Vol. 4, 80-106: The National Archives, Kew, England. Consulted in: *Slavery, Abolition & Social Justice*: <http://www.slavery.amdigital.co.uk.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/Contents/DocumentDetails.aspx?documentid=440188&prevPos=440188&let=D&vpath=Default&pi=1>.

⁷ Wallbridge, 2-3.

⁸ Usage of "negroes," "mulatto," and other descriptors are in most cases reflective of the words used within the narratives. Where the word "slave" appears, it is in most cases my own description because within the three primary sources the word "slave" appears rarely, if at all.

On Monday, August 18 at about six or seven o'clock in the morning a mulatto servant named Joseph at plantation *La Reduit*, located about five miles from Georgetown, informed his master, Mr. Simpson (Burgher Master and Captain of the Georgetown Troop of Cavalry) that the negroes were planning a revolt either that day or the following.⁹ A map drawn by Bryant following the Rebellion shows the shape and size of plantations on the East Coast, as well as demarcations where rebels' heads were later displayed, while a more modern map more clearly depicts the locations of specific plantations and the bush in the back country beyond the plantations (see Figures 4.4 and 4.5).¹⁰ Joseph had been watching the slaves and had persuaded a slave named Donderdaag to act as his spy. According to Donderdaag, the plans had been set the evening before at Bethel Chapel, with leaders to organize gangs to rise at different estates simultaneously.¹¹ Simpson rode away to inform the Governor, on his way leaving warnings at various plantations. At about ten o'clock Simpson met with Governor Murray, who ordered the cavalry to assemble immediately and meet at the Court House at noon. Simpson was ordered to take his cavalry to *Le Reduit*, on the way alerting more plantations of impending violence. The troop of cavalry, according to Bryant, "altogether did not amount to more than fourteen men," and arrived at *Le Reduit* at about four o'clock in the afternoon.¹² At about five o'clock the Governor and the Fiscal arrived in a carriage, attended by Brigade-Major Captain Campbell, an Aide-de-Camp named Lieutenant Hammill, and the Governor's Secretary, also named John Murray. Captain Simpson was ordered to send a sergeant and four troopers to the Mahaica Creek military post, on the way informing Burgher Captains McTurk and Spencer of the

⁹ Terms such as "negroes," "coloured," "insurgent," and "rebel," are found in the primary sources and are indicative of the usage at the time.

¹⁰ The detailed map was drawn in 1824 by Bryant, while the simplified version taken from Craton, *Testing the Chains* gives better detail regarding the plantations involved.

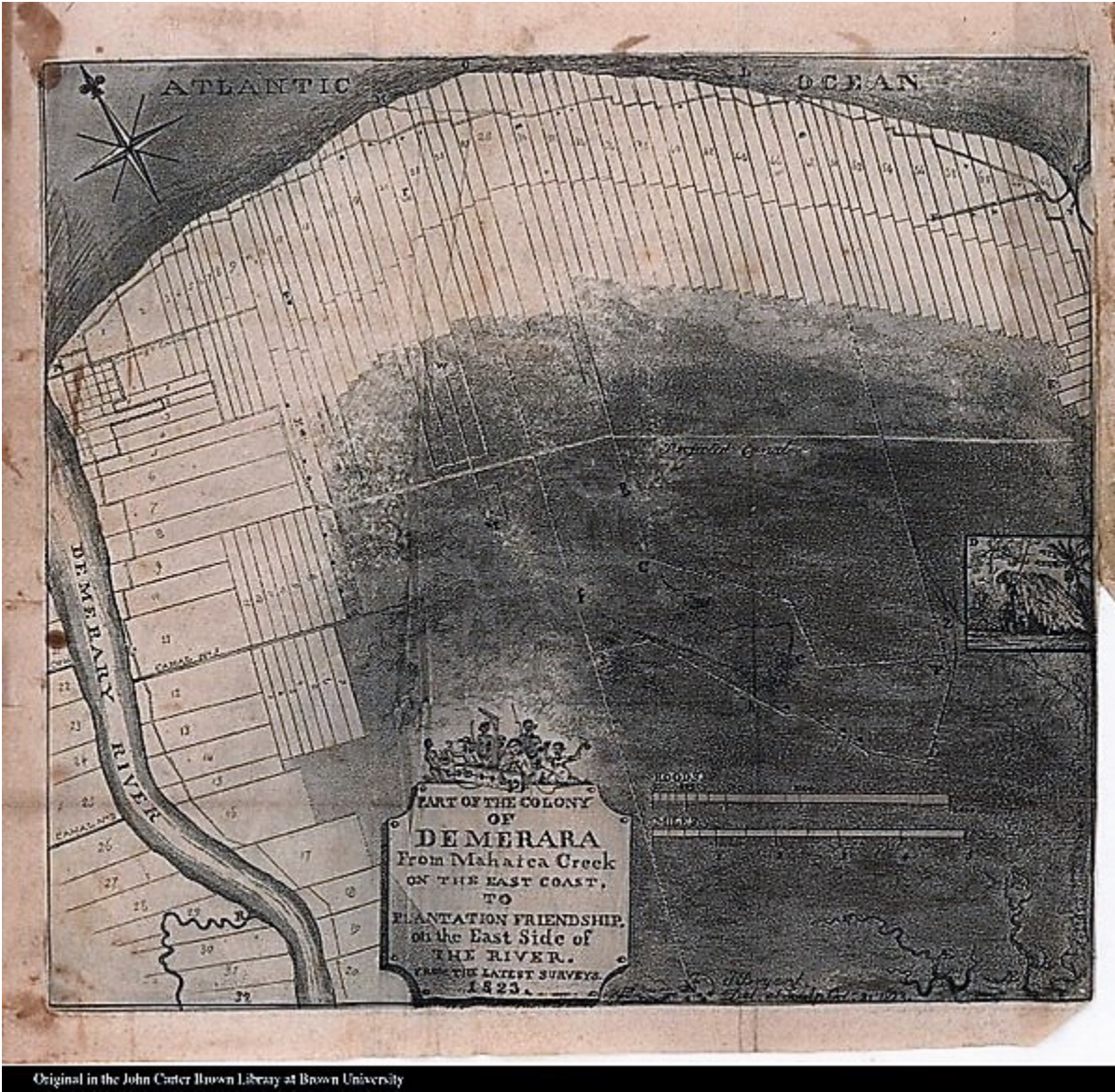
¹¹ Bryant, 1, 2.

¹² *Ibid*, 2, 3.

situation, as well as any plantations they could notify without causing themselves undue delay. The Governor and First Fiscal interviewed Joseph and Donderdaag, which resulted in the Governor being convinced that “a spirit of insubordination and rebellion was in full activity.” A slave named Mars, of plantation *Vryheid's Lust*, was named as a rebel leader and taken into custody.”¹³

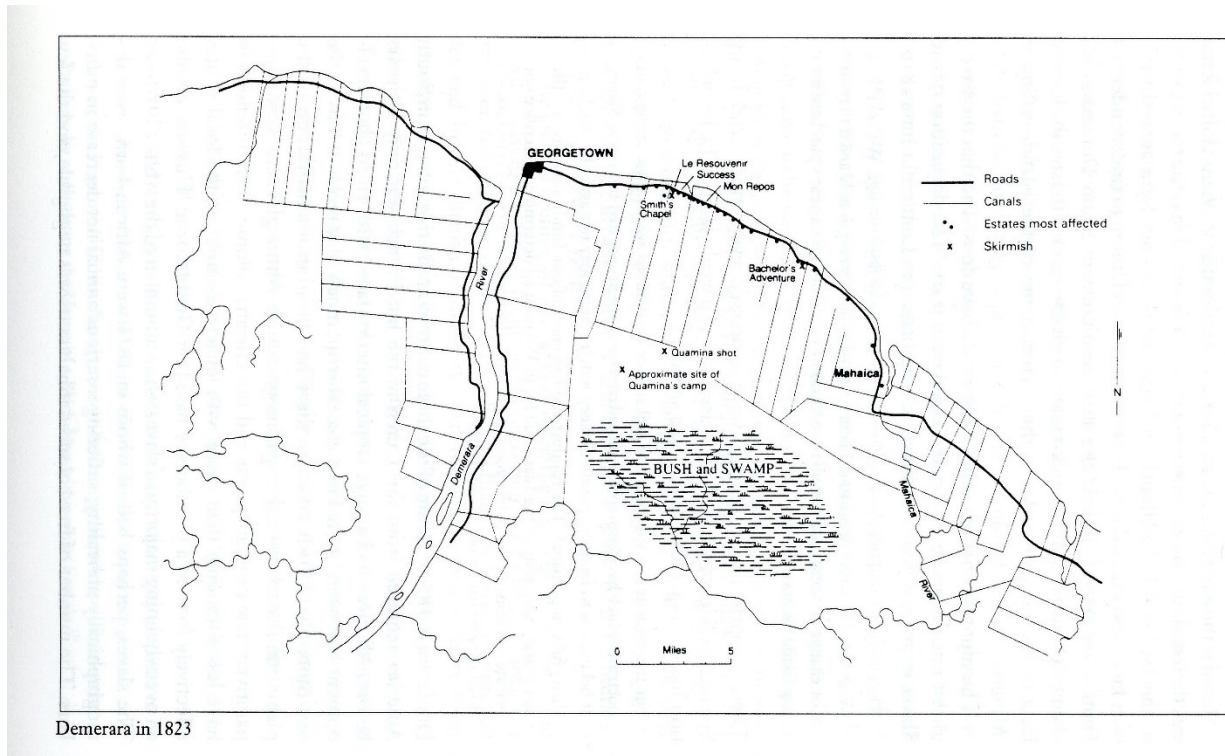
¹³ Ibid, 3.

Figure 4.4. Map of Demerara circa 1823 by Joshua Bryant.



Source: Bryant, *Account of an Insurrection*, 1823. Original in John Carter Brown Library.

Figure 4.5. Map of Demerara showing area of Rebellion.



Source: Craton, *Empire, Enslavement & Freedom*, 288.

While this was happening, planter Dr. Michael McTurk was at his plantation, *Felicity*. “[A] coloured man” arrived and asked McTurk if he had heard about the rebellion. Apparently, during the conversation the names of Quamina of *Success* and Cato of *Felicity* were put forward as rebel leaders.¹⁴ Despite Cato denying any knowledge, McTurk sent him to the stocks at plantation *Brothers*. When McTurk notified the manager at *Success*, this manager stated that Quamina’s son, Jack, would be certain to be involved. The two slaves were not to be found, whereupon McTurk decided that a revolt was indeed in progress. He rode to plantation *Chateau Margo* and an overseer rode to nearby plantations to spread word and to let the white militia know what was happening. At plantation *Success* an overseer observed “a large number of

¹⁴ Ibid, 4.

negroes collected together [and he found them] ... to be armed.” After riding to meet the Governor at *Vryheid's Lust*, McTurk informed the Governor that a fire was seen at either *La Bonn Intention* or *Mon Repos*.¹⁵

Taken at face value, the information thus far does indeed seem to support a large slave rebellion in the making. Looking back, considering that men such as Murray, McTurk, and others who testified at trial were the most influential in Demerara and had close ties to each other, it is apparent that virtually all the major events took place in the presence of these men. This is not to suggest that they exaggerated events, but it appears that other actions which might show more slaves actively involved or greater damage to people and property did not occur and appear in later reports. We do not know what Joseph and Donderdaag's relationship was with Burgher Master/Captain Simpson, whether or not they were seeking preferment or if they were in fact very loyal. Simpson was the first to alert Murray to the uprising, while according to Bryant, simultaneously McTurk was interrogating a slave named Cato and the manager at *Success* put forward Quamina and Jack's names. While I do not suggest that the Rebellion did not begin in this way, it is possible that McTurk and Simpson had expectations of a full-scale rebellion which did not include a coordinated protest over labour conditions, that they had preconceived notions of who would lead such a rebellion, and that it would begin on and include the plantations with which they were most familiar.

The Governor and Captain Simpson and “two file of men [rode] ... at full gallop” to the site of the fire and then to plantation *Chateau Margo*.¹⁶ This quotation from Bryant's narratives gives the sense of a large military operation; however, further reading shows that this group was

¹⁵ Ibid, 4.

¹⁶ Ibid, 5.

made up of Simpson “with his four men,” which somewhat diminishes the impression. This is similar in style to Bryant’s reference to Governor Murray “and suite, with the undetached part of the Cavalry, etc. [who] followed rapidly,” which likely only consisted of thirteen men – the detachment which started as fourteen, four of which were now with Simpson, now also had the Governor, the Fiscal, and Secretary Murray. Bryant also influenced readers’ views of the defenders by describing Murray, as he listened to the news of the Rebellion, with his “accustomed urbanity.”¹⁷

Comparing Bryant’s account with Murray’s despatch, Reverend Wallbridge’s narrative, and trial testimony, it does not seem that he embellished numbers, but he does write in a sensational style which affects a reader’s perception of the engagements. A group of armed slaves were described as a “large body,” while Wallbridge said there were “about forty,” this being the number also given by Murray in his despatch.¹⁸ All three writers agree that the Governor went forward and told the rebels to lay down their arms, which only two or three did. Murray told them that improvements to their condition were to be made, although these would be rescinded if they did not end their rebellious behaviour. The slaves shouted “No!” Shells were blown, and Wallbridge and Murray both stated that one slave fired a musket at the Governor as he drove off. At dawn on August 19 Murray declared martial law.¹⁹

What Bryant described next is somewhat confusing, and actual numbers are not given in any of the three sources. It does, however, serve to give an impression of how the rebels progressed. At plantation *Success* Captain Simpson saw several slaves with cutlasses at the

¹⁷ Ibid, 5-6, 2.

¹⁸ Ibid, 5; Wallbridge, 90; Murray 11.

¹⁹ Bryant, 5-6; Wallbridge, 90, Murray, 11-12.

entrance to the manager's house.²⁰ The manager called out that they "were doing no harm," and the slaves tried to surround the horses in "great numbers." Apparently, mounted men tried to get the whites on their horses behind them, but they were panic stricken and either got off or fell off. A fire had been spotted coming from "a large heap of dry grass, and combustible matter," and not from a building, as they had earlier thought.²¹ This incident and a fire in a sheep pen appear to be the only mention of significant fires during the Rebellion. In comparison with Bussa's Rebellion in Barbados, where deliberately set fires did a great deal of damage, this may reflect a less aggressive attempt at rebellion, or simply the result of living in an area where canals and other waterways were abundant.²² The lack of fires is also at odds with Genovese who, in speaking of Demerara, said the colony "went up in flames," providing an example of how a modern historian can give an inaccurate impression.²³

At this point in the narrative Bryant provided what in all probability were indications that the rebels' foremost intention was to force the Governor to address the orders which had been kept under wraps. Whether or not the greater part of the slaves believed that the communication contained ameliorative measures or emancipation appears to have still been unsettled. Bryant stated that the "first object" of the rebels was to capture and put in stocks "all the white inhabitants" to stop them going to Georgetown for help. Afterwards the rebels intended to "[make] themselves masters of their arms and ammunitions" and go to town, in all likelihood to face the Governor regarding the rumoured orders.²⁴ Evidence indicates that this was indeed what the rebelling slaves had intended. Although testimony of the captured slaves is highly suspect

²⁰ What Bryant calls "cutlasses" were likely what today we would refer to as "machetes," or are sometimes known "bills" and used for cutting sugarcane.

²¹ Bryant, 6, 4.

²² Ibid, 42; Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 261-162.

²³ Genovese, 34.

²⁴ Bryant, 6-7.

due to probable coercion, and to some extent so is that of whites in that they were likely overwrought by the excitement of the events, depositions of people who experienced the early part of the uprising support the claim that the whites were simply to be kept from acting against the interests of the slaves.²⁵ These examples do not identify the slaves' intentions as being either a labour-related protest or a full-scale takeover, but they do underscore that their first objective was not to do great harm to the whites. In fact, the planter's wife at *Nabaclis* was told that the slaves "intend you no harm." It was, however, here that one of the white men was fatally shot, although it appears that the fatality occurred after one of the overseers fired first and a slave returned fire.²⁶ While these references do not provide clear indications that the rebels' greater aim was an armed take-over, what they do reveal is a definite strategy of not doing unnecessary harm to whites in order to achieve their objective of forcing the Governor into acting on orders from England, whatever they might be, and that not all the slaves in the area were actively working with them.

At *Mon Repos*, Bryant described a "large crowd of armed negroes" who, after an exchange of fire which lasted twenty minutes, were "beat off." In the description of this altercation Bryant mentions a "stand of arms" of six or eight for four overseers. A stand of arms, in the eighteenth century, consisted of a musket and bayonet, sometimes also including a cartridge and belt.²⁷ Bryant claimed that this group of negroes had "at least fifty stand of arms."²⁸ At *Beter Hope*, at the behest of the overseer, the slaves said that they would defend

²⁵ See, for example, Depositions of Hubert Whitlock, 11-12, Mrs. M. Walrand, 22, Ogilvie Airth, 23, and J. P. Slingarde, 25, *Further Papers, viz, Return to an Address of the Honourable the [sic] House of Commons, dated 13th April, 1824: Relating to Insurrection of Slaves in Demerara With Minutes of Trials*, Proquest UK Parliamentary Papers.

²⁶ Bryant, 6-7, 8-9.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 9-10; *The Free Dictionary*: <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/A+stand+of+arms>.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 9-10.

“themselves and their master’s property.” When a “large body” of insurgents arrived, they were able to capture the whites -- one of whom received a head wound. Upon hearing the military arriving, the insurgents fled without any of the slaves from *Beter Hope* joining them, instead releasing the whites after the rebels had left.²⁹ The action at these two plantations emphasizes two important points about this rebellion: First, although references to insurgents frequently mention them being armed, this often consists of make-shift arms such as “cutlasses” – which were the farming implements that today are referred to as “machetes;” however, there were some stolen guns, but generally not in great abundance. Second, *Beter Hope* is an example of a plantation where slaves did not join the rebels and released and assisted the whites after the rebels had passed by – thus contradicting statements that “all” the slaves on the East Coast plantations rebelled.

At this point it is unclear to the reader, and perhaps also to those involved, if all of the rebellious slaves encountered were in separate groups, or whether, as seems likely from the descriptions, groups travelled from one plantation to another, joining together and breaking off from each other. Either way, numbers are uncertain. To cause even greater difficulty in understanding events precisely, Bryant himself is not certain of particulars. He said in rather unspecific terms that the rebels went on to “about forty plantations on the East Coast – say from plantation *Plaisance*, four miles from town ... to the estate of *Clonbrook*, ... and but for the timely resistance they met with ... would have extended that evening at least beyond Mahaica Creek,” which seems to be at most an educated guess.³⁰ Interestingly, while Bryant’s language sounds speculative here, it seems it is actually closer to being a true rendition than some sources

²⁹ Ibid, 10-11.

³⁰ Ibid, 13.

from which more precision would be expected. For example, Craton refers to the Rebellion spreading to “over 50 estates,” when an enumeration based on trial papers indicates that thirty-seven estates contained rebel slaves.³¹ This is but one example of some of the confusion present in narratives about Demerara – while Bryant sounded somewhat overwrought in his telling of the story, evidence points to him being correct on some important points.

Bryant’s excited narrative style, although his facts seem reasonably sound for a retelling of obviously frightened white planters’ stories, may have influenced a tale which expanded over time. The importance of wording in a retelling of rebellions, particularly when some sources must remain silent or are coerced into testifying, is reflected in the following anecdote. On the evening of Monday, the 18th, McTurk, Lieutenant Forrester and four or five of the cavalrymen, along with Lieutenant Cort and two or three others, headed down the coast with six to eight more joining them on the way toward Georgetown. They found one of the many bridges over the canals that criss-crossed the colony broken and barricaded. A rebel group approached *Le Reduit* and moved on as a “multitude of negroes from *Cuming’s Lodge, Turkeyen*, and other ... estates” joined them.”³² Although a “multitude” sounds like a large contingent, it must be remembered that Bryant often made his narrative sound more exciting and contain larger numbers than actually recorded. Likewise, in this case, he seems to have glossed over an event that, examined carefully, appears to have been an unflattering reflection on both the militia and the army regulars. The militia, which had observed the “multitude” and who were riding toward Georgetown, met regular troops who had been sent out to meet them. Neither group could see

³¹ This discrepancy is more closely examined in Chapter 4 when drawing conclusions as to the number of slaves involved. Craton, *Empire, Enslavement & Freedom*, 289; British Colonial Office. *Further Papers, viz, Return to an Address of the Honourable the [sic] House of Commons, dated 13th April, 1824: Relating to Insurrection of Slaves in Demerara With Minutes of Trials*, Proquest UK Parliamentary Papers, 15.

³² Bryant, 15.

the other and when a rebel fired, the troops shot back, whereupon the rebels dispersed, “leaving the militia exposed to Captain Stewart’s fire,” which hit a Mr. Van Waterschoodt in the leg. The military, who had come from Georgetown specifically to relieve the militia coming toward them, continued to fire as did the militia after the rebels had scattered until McTurk “galloped up and explained.” Murray, in his Official Account, mentioned only that Mr. Van Waterschoodt, “accidentally exposed ... to a cross fire in the road, received a wound in the leg.”³³ Reading these two descriptions of the incident, it could be easy to miss the more important issue if one is trying to ascertain how transparent and even-handed these authorities are in their retelling. What is not expressly stated is that neither group was trained as befitted their tasks in the colony. Although one group was expecting help (the militia) and the other group (the regulars) were expecting to come to their aid, they reacted quickly to rebels in the roadway, seemingly unaware that fire was coming from their compatriots when the rebels immediately fled. Judging from this, it is entirely possible that the rebels may not have fired the first shot or indeed fired at all, considering the confusion of the continued shooting. Both Bryant and Murray chose wording that, while not falsifying facts, tended to gloss over what would have an embarrassing (and disastrous) event.

The following encounter at *Bachelor’s Adventure* contains information which is particularly important as a reflection of how many slaves were actively involved in the Rebellion, and for what, when asked, slaves said was their intention. It is also an incident which is repeatedly brought up in retelling the narrative of the Rebellion, but misses out on analyzing what was stated at the time about how many slaves were involved, as compared to total numbers of rebels. Keeping in mind that Bryant and Murray seem to have avoided providing false

³³ Ibid, 16; John Murray, *The Demerara Rebellion of 1823: An Official Account of Military Operations*, Kindle Edition, 22. <https://www.amazon.com/Demerara-Rebellion-1823-Official-Operations-ebook/dp/B012HZBXOW>.

information, but wrote in a manner which glorified or at least put the militia and regulars in a flattering light, other encounters with insurgents are somewhat vague as to the numbers involved, but tend toward images of large crowds. For example, a group led by Captain Simpson found several bridges broken before reaching *Beterwerwaging* where they met a “large tumultuous mob of armed negroes,” who were “obliged to desist” by the cavalry.³⁴ Other encounters are noted wherein numbers are not provided, and although at least one refers to a “vast crowd of negroes,” none suggest hundreds or thousands of insurgents until the military, under Colonel Leahy, arrived at *Bachelor’s Adventure*.³⁵ Bryant wrote that Leahy learned that “the whole rebel force had assembled together at this place, amounting to at least 2,000.”³⁶ In his despatch, released August 22, 1823, Murray reported that *Bachelor’s Adventure* was “found to be the rendezvous of the disaffected, in number considerably above 1,500.”³⁷ A young clerk named John Cheveley, who served in the militia, recorded in his journal that the crowd of rebel slaves numbered between 3,000 and 4,000.³⁸ Before Leahy’s troops mowed down somewhere between 100 – 150 slaves, there was a parley in which Leahy asked what the insurgents wanted.³⁹ According to Bryant’s account: “They said – two days in the week, and some of them said three.” Leahy advised them to surrender their arms and go home, and that he would tell this to the Governor. As the slaves made no to move to disperse, Leahy spoke to them again: “They then said, that ‘they wanted their freedom – that the King had sent it out – and that *they would be free.*”

³⁴ Bryant, 16.

³⁵ Ibid, 17-18. The details of encounters, including the largest at *Bachelor’s Adventure*, are little used in secondary sources on Demerara. Craton and da Costa described them without analysis as to meaning in the overall Rebellion. Craton provided some interpretation such as which slave likely threatened taking hostages of Captains Leahy and Croal. Da Costa provided further details of the Bachelor’s Adventure encounter which focused on the animosity between Leahy’s men and the rebels. Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 284-285; da Costa, 220-221.

³⁶ Bryant, 33.

³⁷ Murray, *Official Account*, 53.

³⁸ London Missionary Society Archive, *Journal of John Cheveley*, as noted in da Costa, 220.

³⁹ Ibid, *Official Account*, 58.

(Bryant emphasized the statement referring to freedom, which may reflect that this, to him and possibly other whites, was of greater importance than the slaves' first demand.) Leahy then read the proclamation of martial law and added to the slaves' suggestion that if they were to go to town to see the Governor rather than using Leahy as an intermediary, they would be hanged. Bryant continued: "Several of the ringleaders now advanced near to the middle-walk, and stated, they wished to speak to the Colonel, whom they informed, that the negroes were determined to have nothing less than their freedom." Leahy warned them that they would be fired upon, and it took only one slave's shouting "come on" for the troops to do just that.⁴⁰

The continuation of the Rebellion narrative primarily consists of further descriptions of encounters with rebels on the various estates and what action was taken, but do not add much in the way of useful insight to the questions at issue here, except that Wallbridge explained that after the encounter at *Bachelor's Adventure* the rebels seemed to be terrified and either fled into the bush or came back to work.⁴¹ Trials of slaves began on August 25 and executions began the following day.⁴² Smith was arrested at his home on August 21 on the order of McTurk for not bearing arms during a time of martial law, although he was a man of the cloth and ill with consumption, which would end his life some weeks later while he waited in prison for his death sentence to be either carried out or to be rescinded by the British Crown.⁴³

That some of the rebels' actions in Demerara looked a great deal like a general strike rather than a violent insurrection such as was seen during the Haitian Revolution raises the question of what constituted a rebellion. The uprising was, for many of the slaves, a protest

⁴⁰ Bryant, 33-34. .

⁴¹ Wallbridge, 92.

⁴² Ibid, 94-95.

⁴³ Wallbridge referred to the charges against Smith for encouraging rebellion to have been an "afterthought" on the part of McTurk, who "never forgot an insult nor forgave an injury." Ibid, 84-88.

against unfair working conditions and a protest, the slaves believed, against the fact that the authorities in Demerara were disregarding orders for amelioration (or freedom, as some of the slaves believed) from their rulers in Britain.⁴⁴ The effect of whites' fear and a white perspective of slave rebellion would eventually make the story of Demerara a foregone conclusion. As reported at trial, a great rebellion of slaves occurred with all the violence expected by the narrators. That almost all of the violence was the whites' own doing and that this story may have been adapted to cover irresponsible actions is not surprising. In the twentieth century, the massive numbers of slaves, and the idea that "all" of them were involved, provided an inspiring image for sympathetic historians of slaves unanimously rising together for freedom and to control their own destinies. The sources actually indicate something more complex and nuanced.

In some respects, the rebellion in 1816 in Barbados resembled the rebellion in 1823 in Demerara. But there were also obvious geographic and demographic differences in the two that would be reflected in specific incidents reported during the colonies' respective rebellions. These variations help to emphasize particular themes common to reportage of both. Barbados was a small, mostly flat island which was almost completely under cultivation, while Demerara, located on the mainland, encompassed jungles and mountainous regions. Plantations were generally located all over the island as the soil was fertile throughout, while Demerara's plantations were organized in orderly lines along the coast and rivers (see Figures 4.6 and 4.7)⁴⁵ Despite a vast difference in geographical size, the populations of both colonies were similar at the time of their respective rebellions: In 1817, Barbados' slave population was approximately 77,493, according to Higman, ninety-three percent of which were Creole.⁴⁶ Historian Hilary

⁴⁴ See Smith's conversation with Quamina. *Ibid*, July 20 and August 8, 1823.

⁴⁵ Higman, 86, 91.

⁴⁶ Higman, 419.

Beckles noted that by 1800 more than ninety percent of the entire population of Barbados, black and white, were born on the island and that during the slave registration enterprise most owners had held their estates fifty years earlier.⁴⁷ Demerara's slave population in 1823, which *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* put at 75,080, was much the same as Barbados' population.⁴⁸ Of Demerara's slave population in 1823, creoles made up slightly more than forty-six percent.⁴⁹ While ownership of Demerara had changed frequently in the previous four decades and its laws at the time of rebellion were a mixture of British Common Law and Dutch legal regulation and habit, Barbados, on the other hand, had been in British hands since the early seventeenth century. By 1816, it was subject to a slave code defined by long-term tradition and experience of the controlling white British-derived population.⁵⁰ Barbados had seen a period of upheaval just prior to Bussa's Rebellion, partially related to the challenges of the sugar industry and resulting in hardship for the slaves in food supply and work expectations.⁵¹ This is somewhat comparable to Demerara's troubles pre-1823 as an agriculturally-based colony separated geographically from its controlling government.

⁴⁷ Beckles, 111.

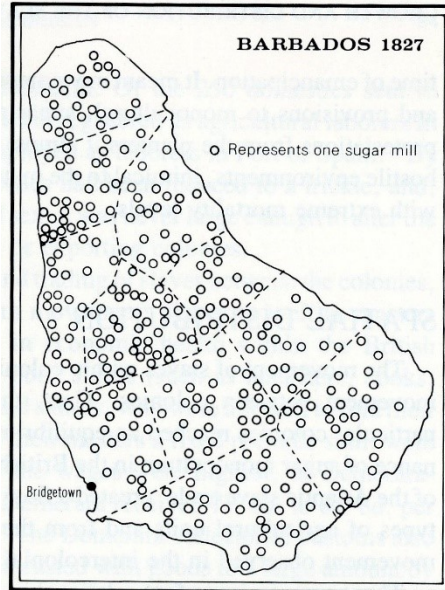
⁴⁸ *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 25, 644: <file:///G:/Blackwood's%20Edinburgh%20Magazine%20-%20Google%20Books.html>.

⁴⁹ See Chapter 1 for further discussion of Demerara's population; see also *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 25, 644.

⁵⁰ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 254-256. See also p. 259 regarding "local legal autonomy."

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 259.

Figure 4.6. Spatial map of Barbados *circa* 1827.



Source: Higman, 86.

Figure 4.7. Spatial map of Demerara *circa* 1820.

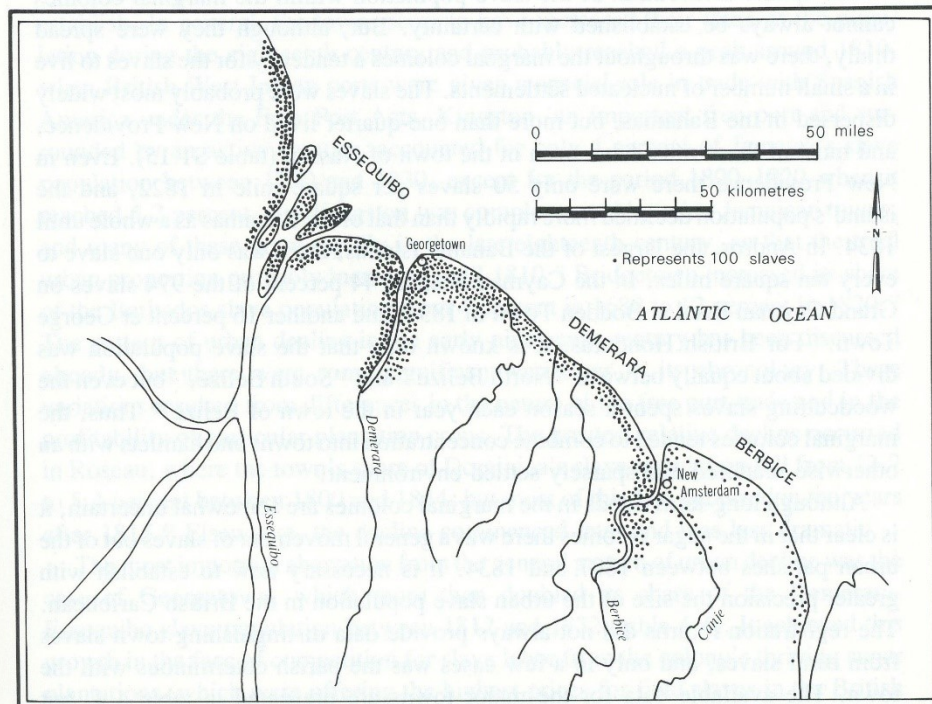


Fig. 4.6. *Distribution of Rural Slaves in Demerara-Essequibo and Berbice c.1820.* (Sources: tables S1.13-1.14.)

Source: Higman, 91.

As in Demerara, there were rumours circulating in Barbados about freedom. There was also a long-standing policy of planters not instituting ameliorative measures, and Craton and Beckles agree that a reaction to slave registration may have sparked the Barbados Rebellion.⁵² According to Craton, it appears that the slaves' plan, such as it was, favoured a "preference for non-violent strike action." However, there were plans for extensive fires resulting in the destruction of property, and inspired by the revolt in Saint Domingue, although the slaves referred to that island as "Mingo," revealing only a partial knowledge of the circumstances. While the fires did result in significant damage, there were apparently no plans for a "general massacre."⁵³

Descriptions of Bussa's Rebellion are almost uncannily similar to that of Demerara in some respects. Starting on the evening of April 14, 1816, the Rebellion was in large part quelled two days later. As in Demerara, the rebels were overwhelmingly beaten, with hundreds of slaves dying and only one white civilian and a black soldier dying while fighting on behalf of the white authorities.⁵⁴ There were, however, some differences. This is unsurprising given the geographic make-up of the colony as it was criss-crossed with canals and other waterways. In papers related to the Demerara Rebellion, there is a report regarding fires which mentions numerous "fire sticks" being thrown, but these do not seem to have worked, and one testimony said that they could not be found.⁵⁵ Property loss in Demerara seems to have primarily consisted of bridges which were broken by the rebels to prevent easy access to plantations. While in Demerara there

⁵² Hilary McD Beckles, "The Slave-drivers' War: Bussa and the 1816 Barbados Slave Rebellion," *Boletín De Estudios Latinoamericanos Y Del Caribe*, No. 39 (1985): 85-110. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25675274>, 91,92; Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 259-260.

⁵³ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 261.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 262-264.

⁵⁵ *Further Papers, viz, Return to an Address of the Honourable the [sic] House of Commons, dated 13th April, 1824: Relating to Insurrection of Slaves in Demerara With Minutes of Trials*, Proquest UK Parliamentary Papers, 19.

appears to have been a strict division along colour lines between the opposing sides, Barbados possessed a regiment of black military regulars who fought alongside white troops.

Unfortunately, the rebels had made a grave miscalculation in assuming that these men would not fight against rebellious black slaves and were taken by surprise when attacked by them.⁵⁶ An interesting aspect of Bussa's Rebellion is that whites had been accustomed to the slaves petitioning for better treatment or withholding labour in protest, and there had been no slave revolt in Barbados for the entire eighteenth century. In Demerara the whites were "haunted" by memories of rebellion.⁵⁷ These particular memories are described by Craton as a "tradition" within the area under both the Dutch and the subsequent British government. This tradition encompassed maroon activity and frequent uprisings by the still-enslaved, including Cuffee's Rebellion, during which the Dutch were very nearly expelled from Berbice.⁵⁸

Two particular features of the Rebellions may indicate that reportage of the uprisings was affected by whites' perceptions, thus possibly explaining the likenesses. White planters expected a rebellion to happen in certain ways, and therefore that could be what they saw and emphasized. In Bussa's Rebellion, as in Demerara, the possibility of the incident being a labour protest was considered after the fact by some historians. Beckles, one of the few authors to address the Barbados uprising in any detail, notes that at the time of the Rebellion officials seem to have been convinced that this was not a protest, but a takeover.⁵⁹ In Demerara as well, there are few indicators within official documents that this might be anything but a rebellion except for reports of slaves saying that they wanted more free time. It may be that whites panicked and did not

⁵⁶ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 262-263.

⁵⁷ Beckles, "Slave-drivers' War," 89; Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 270.

⁵⁸ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 270: Craton stated that there were slave revolts in 1733, 1749, 1752, and 1762, with at least fourteen rebel plots were discovered.

⁵⁹ Beckles, "Slave-drivers' War," 88.

consider any possibility other than outright rebellion and a take-over by the enslaved. The other consideration is that there was no real evidence except for slave testimony that Smith or Quamina were rebel leaders, and Beckles reported the same with regard to Bussa.⁶⁰ As is evident two hundred years later, in spite of this, their names are emblematic of the incidents, possibly reflecting a foregone conclusion of the popular narrative.

The aftermath of Bussa's Rebellion reveals a major difference from the aftermath in Demerara in 1823. While many slaves in both rebellions were killed outright, put to death after trial or transported, and many of the dead, or at least their heads, were displayed publicly in both colonies, there appears to have been a marked difference between white authorities' public reflections afterward. In both Demerara and Barbados, martial law continued for months, but while in Demerara there was no noticeable remorse, in Barbados senior military officer Colonel Edward Codd admitted (although with excuses) that militia members "were induced to use their Arms rather too indiscriminately in pursuit of the Fugitives," while Rear Admiral Harvey said that the militia "put many Men, Women & Children to Death, I fear without much discrimination."⁶¹ These commanders blamed indiscriminate violence on local militia as they lacked the discipline of regular troops; Governor Leith described the ongoing capture and trial as being under "the extremely defective law." The Governor, who died shortly afterward, was "thoroughly fatigued, if not sickened."⁶² In Demerara there were no such admissions, explanations or excuses, and indeed Governor Murray and Colonel Leahy were rewarded by the planters. This makes an interesting comparison. The accused perpetrator, John Smith, was tried, sentenced to hang, and then died in jail, while Governor Murray was feted in Demerara before

⁶⁰ Ibid, 90.

⁶¹ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 264.

⁶² Ibid, 265.

being ordered back to England where he was censured and never given another posting.⁶³ While one reason for this difference in attitude could be Demerara having the misfortune to acquire a governor unfit for the job and influenced by at least one particularly cruel authority figure in McTurk, the long-term familial connections common in Barbados may be another.

As the slave registration project revealed, in Barbados there was a tendency for families to hold their estates for decades. This, combined with the large percentage of creole slaves in the nineteenth century, made for long-term connections between black and white, even with the vast power imbalance. Demerara's population in 1817 was made up in large part of people who were relatively new to the area.⁶⁴ There was a large number of absentee landowners and the slave population was made up, in large part, of a high percentage of Africans or first-generation creoles -- a vastly different demographic than in Barbados. Higman supplied a list of percentages of African-born slaves in British Caribbean colonies circa 1817, which Beckles shared, wherein Barbados claimed 7.1 percent as being African-born, while Demerara-Essequibo's stood at 54.7 percent.⁶⁵ This may have made a difference in how the respective governors expressed themselves in the aftermath of rebellion. As Beckles demonstrated, Barbados' white population was largely island-born and bred, and his article on creolization and slave labour discusses at length the interwoven politics of families, both slave and planter, which had resulted in a complicated system of slave labour classifications and opportunities.⁶⁶

⁶³ Ibid, 289.

⁶⁴ Higman explained that 1817 was the first year that reliable data was available due to the implemented slave registration system.

⁶⁵ Higman, 116; Beckles, *Creolisation in Action*, 112. Higman does not provide precise data for 1823 Demerara, but states that in 1832 34.5 percent were African.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 111. Beckles stated that by 1800, 90 per cent or more of whites were island-born. For an explanation of slaves' classifications and opportunities, see, in particular, Beckles, *Creolisation in Action*, 112-116.

The common belief among whites that in most cases slaves intended to become the masters themselves is a recurrent theme in slave rebellions and conspiracies throughout the Americas. This has been reported in captured rebel slaves' testimonies and in the assertions of white commentators.⁶⁷ The example of the rebellion in Saint Domingue/Haiti remained a spectre in white consciousness, described by A. J. Williams-Myers as "that long black shadow of defeat."⁶⁸ While the rebellion in Saint Domingue was successful from the point of view that the colony was henceforth no longer under the rule of Europeans, each slave-holding colony had its own particular circumstances which could affect the outcome of a slave rebellion. Equally as uncertain as a slave victory was what plans slaves had if they did succeed in a rebellion; any slave testimony indicating that this was the goal was in all likelihood coerced.

Writing about Gabriel's Conspiracy in Virginia, Michael Nicholls asked: "Is it possible that different scenarios were presented to different individuals?"⁶⁹ Nicholls was convinced that the records reflected that in order to appeal to more recruits, the slave conspirators used their own interpretations of what the potential rebellion was about, depending on who they were recruiting.⁷⁰ Genovese noted the possibility that there was more than one opinion among rebels as to what they were fighting for. He wrote that aims of rebel slaves were "debatable," except for an intention of freeing themselves and as many others as possible. In this, he suggested that in the Virginia rebellion of 1831 Nat Turner may have considered forming a large maroon

⁶⁷ See, for example, references to Tacky's Revolt (Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 125), as Craton cites Bryan Edwards as comparing it to the Haitian Revolution; also refer to the Demerara Rebellion and Bussa's Rebellion comparison here.

⁶⁸ Williams-Myers, 396.

⁶⁹ Nicholls, 32.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 32.

community, and Denmark Vesey, in South Carolina in 1822, had likely “tried to keep several options open.”⁷¹

While the rumour surfaced during and after Bussa’s and the Demerara Rebellions that a victory for the rebels could result in an up-ending of a colony’s power structure, it appears uncertain as to how it was to be carried out. Hilary Beckles quoted a pro-abolitionist society, reflecting how unwise such an idea would have been in Bussa’s Rebellion due to the “topographical unsuitability” of the area with its flat, fully agricultural landscape which gave all the advantage to the mounted and armed planters’ forces. The Society claimed that: “Barbados was the very worst field for such an experiment, since in no British colony was success in an attempt to obtain even a short lived freedom by insurrection so hopeless.”⁷² As seen in the swift hunt for the rebel Quamina and his companions by the “bush negroes” of Demerara, even an area with a substantial “bush” was dangerous for slaves hoping to evade authority.⁷³ Plans for holding and maintaining such a state and answers to questions such as whether the newly freed slaves would send embassies to Europe or how they would respond to military intervention from outside seem to have been lacking. Genevose’s suggestion that slaves kept options open makes sense in such a situation if the plan was for the overthrow of a colony.

It appears from a slave-made flag which appeared in Barbados that rebels may have had some idea of sovereignty as an outcome of Bussa’s Rebellion (see Figure 4.8).⁷⁴ A description from an anonymous contemporary account states that this flag was a crudely drawn representation featuring a black man and a white woman either in, or in anticipation of, sexual

⁷¹ Genevose, 48. It should be noted that this is now one of the rebellions that Johnson believes to be questionable.

⁷² Beckles, “Slave-drivers’ War,” 86.

⁷³ Bryant, 63-88.

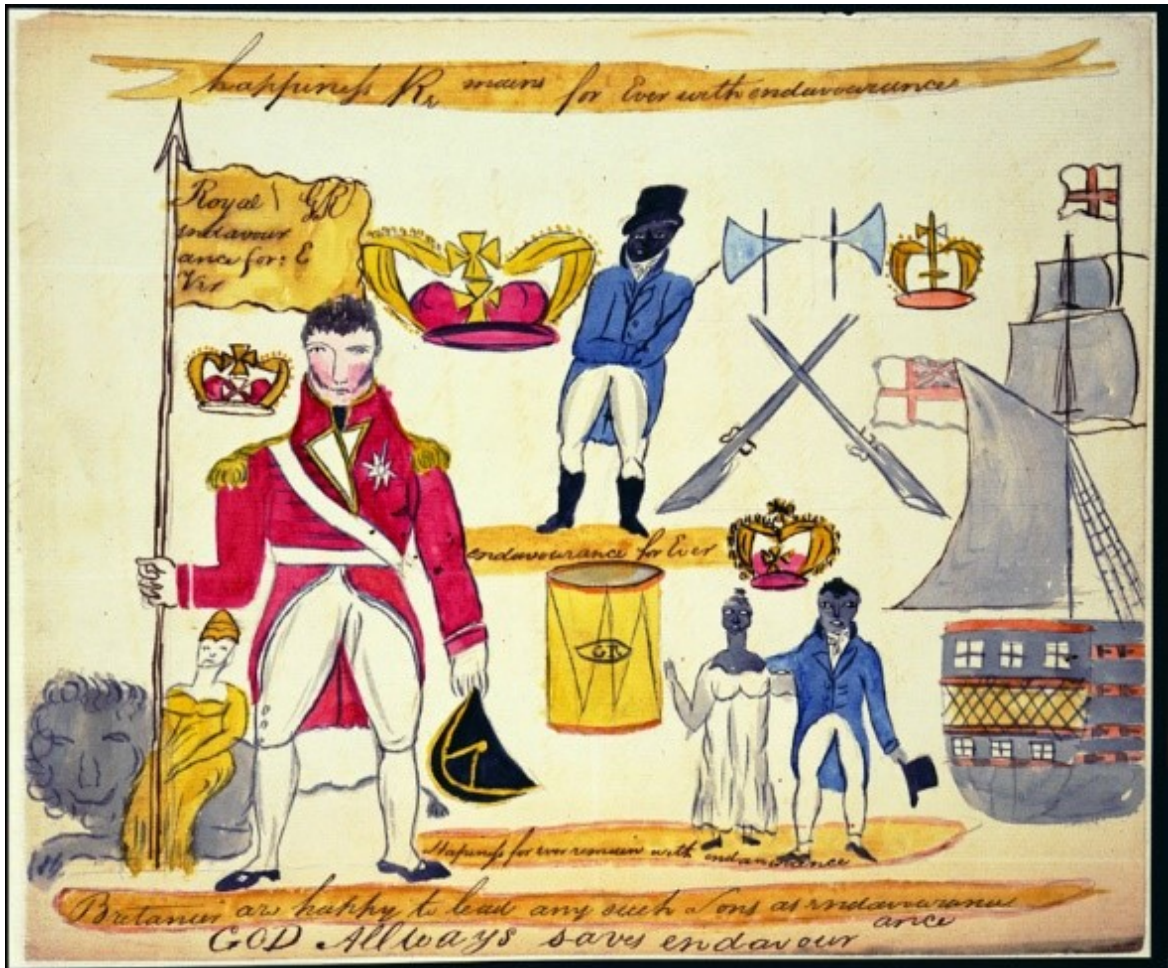
⁷⁴ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 263.

congress. Michael Craton noted that this flag depicted no such drawing, if it was the one which Colonel Codd sent to the Governor and which was then sent to London.⁷⁵ The flag which the Governor sent to London does indeed depict a black man, but he is well-dressed, and a white woman, seated away from the black man. She appears to be wearing a gold-coloured pointed head-dress, is seated on a lion and is quite likely meant to represent Britannia. A well-turned-out black couple stands together, one arm around each other's shoulders. It is also not particularly crudely drawn as reported, and it seems possible instead that the state of mind of the anonymous source who described it was "crude" at the time. The flag may support Genovese's idea that in the nineteenth century, creoles were more likely to rebel. His claim that: "creole preponderance marked the great ideological divide in the history of the slave revolts and undermined their restorationist quality" seems to support a vision of a future in which Barbados, formerly a slave society, worked in tandem with "Britannia" herself.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid, 263. See also endnote 33, p. 372.

⁷⁶ Genovese, 100.

Figure 4.8. Suspected Rebel Flag, Barbados, 1816



Source: The National Archives, Kew, England, MFQ 1/112.

In Demerara, it appears certain is that there was a consistent fear by white men that they would be replaced by slave rebels, and while some slave testimony supports this, it is always probable that it was coerced and the slave under interrogation simply repeated what his white captors expected to hear. White notions of blackness and the virility of black men have been remarked upon by historians of slavery as being common even before the advent of the African slave trade. According to Winthrop Jordan, “the association of Africans with potent sexuality” began early in Europeans’ contact with Africans, and the idea that black men were generally

more sexually potent has persisted.⁷⁷ Jordan remarked upon white men's terror of the spectre of black men in violent rebellion killing off their white counterparts and taking the most attractive and high-status women for themselves.⁷⁸ Historian Kathleen Brown, referring to an Englishman named Richard Jobson, *circa* 1623, said that Jobson "embellished theories of African men's color and lasciviousness, claiming that large 'members' and sexual appetites were the legacy of Ham's punishment for seeing his father's nakedness."⁷⁹ Sharon Block, author of *Rape & Sexual Power in Early America*, discusses works which suggested an intensified focus on black men as rapists, particularly in the nineteenth century, but does not deny the long-running fascination with black men's sexuality.⁸⁰ While Arden B. Levy, in an article for the *UCLA Women's Law Journal*, notes that, "rape has been an integral and accepted military tactic throughout the centuries," the concept which seemed most prevalent in slave insurrections was that white men would be replaced, losing all their property, including sexual rights to their wives' bodies, to the men who had been their property before the rebellion.⁸¹

In the aftermath of Bussa's Rebellion, only one slave, an African named Numa, said he had heard that all the white men captured would be killed, but the white women "were to be reserved for their own purpose."⁸² While testifying at trial in Demerara, slave prisoners related variations on this theme. The slave Telemachus stated that if the slaves were victorious, the plan was that Quamina would be king, Jack (Gladstone) of *Success* would be governor, the manager

⁷⁷ Jordan, 33-34.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 150-154.

⁷⁹ Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches & Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996): 111.

⁸⁰ Sharon Block, *Rape & Sexual Power in Early America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006): 164-165.

⁸¹ Arden B. Levy, "International Prosecution of Rape in Warfare: Nondiscriminatory Recognition and Enforcement," *WLJ UCLA Women's Law Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1994): 255-297, 256.

⁸² Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 261.

Hamilton would be a “great man,” the slave Paris would be an officer, and “white ladies” would be allowed to leave the colony, while the white men would toil in the fields. The slave Paris, however, said that the white men would be killed and the white women taken as wives. Other details were supplied by Paris including that certain high-ranking women would be given to the most important black men.⁸³ In a letter to the LMS, Reverend Wray stated that Paris had confessed that he had been convinced by a Captain Edmonstone to lie in his testimony.⁸⁴ These slaves were the only ones who mentioned that Smith would be emperor or that men would be killed and wives taken.⁸⁵

Knowing that testimony which stated that former slaves were to take over the colony was more than likely the product of threat and torture by jailors, historians are left to question how the slaves saw themselves in the role of victors. Did they expect to engage in the greater world’s economy and culture, as Eugene Genovese wondered, or did they see themselves in isolation, what Genovese referred to as “essentially primitive-communal social relations?” Genovese believed that since the inception of a world market, a “restorationist” viewpoint in a slave movement would no longer be an option because of the inability for such an isolated community to thrive.⁸⁶

There are some differences between narratives of Demerara and Bussa’s Rebellions, yet there are definite commonalities. It is quite possible that these commonalities are more a reflection of perceived notions of slave rebellions than real happenings during the uprisings.

⁸³ *Further Papers, viz, Return to an Address of the Honourable the [sic] House of Commons, dated 13th April, 1824: Relating to Insurrection of Slaves in Demerara With Minutes of Trials* (further cited as “*Further Papers With Minutes of Trials.*”) Proquest UK Parliamentary Papers: 24, 30-31, 41, 54.

⁸⁴ London Missionary Society, Incoming Correspondence, Letter from Reverend John Wray, March 29, 1824. Public Records Office, The National Archives, Kew, 111/44, 45, as referenced in da Costa, 366.

⁸⁵ Da Costa, 241.

⁸⁶ Genovese, 90-91.

Another common characteristic between the two colonies' rebellions is the identity of rebel slave leaders, which also may have more kinship with white fears than real characters.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Slave Rebellions' Assumptions and Legends – Demonstrable Facts

During Smith's court martial trial an altercation between Smith and McTurk was recalled by McTurk on the witness stand: McTurk claimed that in 1819 "Mr. Smith attacked me in a very violent manner at the managers house." Questioned by the prosecution, he asserted that Smith "addressed" him in a "very violent manner." Cross-examination by Smith, who was acting in his own defense, revealed that this had consisted of Smith using "disrespectful language" toward McTurk after considerable provocation.¹ This is one example of language used in the documentation related to Demerara which tends to exaggerate the facts and which have not led to questions of the reliability of those who produced them. In this chapter, I explore examples of such overstatements which proliferated in the lead-up to the Rebellion and continued during and after. By applying a critical reappraisal to this documentation, I argue that past narratives have been inaccurate as to specific points regarding not only the Rebellion's size, but also its meaning at the time and in modern historiography. This may go some way toward an explanation for exaggerated claims which were taken as fact. Such exaggeration, as well as documented descriptions which mirror white expectations of and paranoia toward slaves, have coloured accounts of slave uprisings from the time they occurred to the present day. This has led historians to underestimate the individuality and complexity within slave communities.

Questions surrounding the role of leaders of purported insurrections are common in documentation following an uprising and in historians' studies of slave conspiracies and rebellions. Trial documents concerning accused leaders reflect particular ideas about their identity, often as being drivers or other "élite" slaves. In order to maintain order and keep the

¹ John Murray, *Despatch*, 49, 55, 111 (82, 61, 206 of original):

pace of workers productive enough, the position of “driver” was one which carried a certain prestige and authority for slaves. Drivers, also sometimes known as “superintendents,” “overseers,” or “rangers,” were in a non-labouring supervisory position. They were usually put in this position of semi-authority on estates where there were more than ten field slaves.² They made certain that workers arrived on time and did their work correctly and at an acceptable pace. He, or (rarely) she, ensured that workers got assistance when needed to keep up production.³ Along with drivers, skilled tradespeople were a ubiquitous part of a slave community, particularly on sugar plantations because of the size of the plantations and the manner of manufacturing sugar. Of these, the most common were carpenters, coopers and masons.⁴ While having such occupations did not make a slave’s life easy, it did confer a certain amount of independence. Other specialist positions on a sugar plantation included sugar boilers and rum distillers, although these were field labourers at times when they were not required to fill their specialist roles.⁵ In Demerara, trial documents show that the two slaves accused of being leaders with the greatest influence were both artisans: one was a carpenter and the other a cooper, while other accused rebels included drivers.

In all probability, white fears contributed to interrogators’ prevailing ideas during and after an uprising; not only the consequences of a slave victory, but also including leadership roles. An overview of the traits connected with a leadership position within a slave uprising reveals certain consistencies among suspected leaders from one rebellion to another; what is less certain is whether the people named as leaders did indeed fill that position. Historian Robert

² *Ibid*, 168.

³ *Ibid*, 169.

⁴ *Ibid*, 170.

⁵ *Ibid*, 171.

Paquette explored the factors that made drivers ideal candidates to lead a slave rebellion. He explained how important the driver was to the safe and profitable running of a plantation. The driver was a person who handled the day-to-day hands-on management, dispensing tools and discipline. Paquette described the American South ideal as a “big, tall adult male in his late thirties or early forties” and he quoted a French Caribbean planter in the late-eighteenth century, who said that a driver “ought to possess fidelity, affection, intelligence, sobriety, discretion, justice, and severity. They should know to preserve distance and authority ...”⁶ Once seen by historians as brutal enforcers, Paquette explained that in the late twentieth century they were seen as a more complex group of people, including being the ideal of a slave with the abilities and willingness to lead their own toward freedom.⁷ During the Demerara Rebellion, drivers did not feature in important roles, however, and there was little mention of them, aside from the occasional description as part of a slaves’ testimony.⁸ Neither Quamina nor Jack, the two slaves seen as foremost leaders, were drivers, but Quamina seems to have had many of the traits that are listed here by Paquette and the planter he quoted.

The traits which made drivers suspect as rebel leaders were also present in another group to which Quamina and Jack belonged – the artisan slave. The artisans had particular skills and, as a result, a certain self-assurance and the respect of others. Especially when combined with mature years, in theory this could result in a slave with leadership abilities and some confidence in himself. There were advantages stemming from being a driver or artisan which would assist

⁶ Pierre Joseph Laborie, *The Coffee Planter*, 164-165, as quoted in Paquette, 32.

⁷ Robert L. Paquette, “The Drivers Shall Lead Them: Image and Reality in Slave Resistance,” in *Slavery, Secession, and Southern History*, ed. Robert Louis Paquette and Louis A. Ferleger. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000): 31-58, 40-41..

⁸ See, for example, Colonial Office, Britain. *Further Papers, viz, Return to an Address of the Honourable the [sic] House of Commons, dated 13th April, 1824: Relating to Insurrection of Slaves in Demerara With Minutes of Trials*, Proquest UK Parliamentary Papers, 18.

such slaves in taking on roles of rebel leaders. Drivers and other slaves who held “offices” on a plantation were essential as intermediaries between masters and field gangs and could bargain with both slaves and masters to achieve such benefits for themselves as better provision grounds and time to work for themselves.⁹ This would result in the ability to move around more freely and possess more energy than the average field slave thanks to slightly less exhausting work and better food. Such conditions would be supporting factors for an élite slave to serve as a rebel leader and would be as advantageous as an ability to influence and convince others.¹⁰ There was also generally a large number of field workers in relation to the number of élite slaves, providing plentiful prospects for recruiting. For example, in St. John, Barbados in 1817 within the age group containing the greatest number of slaves, twenty-five to twenty-nine years, there were approximately sixty-four male and eighty-two female field labours and only ten skilled tradespeople.¹¹ In Berbice, in 1819, the example nearest to Demerara supplied by Higman, the same age group shows approximately twenty skilled tradespeople and sixty male and seventy-six female field labourers.¹²

Douglas Egerton, as well as agreeing that an élite position often resulted in the opportunity to make some extra cash, also suggested that the ability to clothe oneself more attractively before going to the market to mingle with others and perhaps make small purchases, enabled such slaves to “put the plantation behind them physically.”¹³ Egerton suggested that any successful act of autonomy by a slave could pave the way for future larger acts of resistance.

⁹ Justin Roberts, “The ‘Better Sort’ and the ‘Poorer Sort’: Wealth Inequalities, Family Formation, and the Economy of Energy on British Caribbean Sugar Plantations, 1750-1800,” *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (September 2014): 458-473, 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 461-464.

¹¹ Higman, 191.

¹² *Ibid*, 195.

¹³ Egerton, 622, 623.

What was needed for a rebellion was a leadership figure who was determined, charismatic, and was able to offer some expertise or aptitude which would draw others to him. Edgerton quoted Gerald W. Mullin, who said that the potential rebel leader Gabriel Prosser had a “businesslike” ability to ‘make decisions, delegate responsibilities, and pursue routine tasks to their completion,’” and noted Denmark Vesey for his strength and respected place in the black community.¹⁴ In these descriptions, more of the qualities are evident which would make a leader, either in reality or as a product of white speculation. Having size, an intimidating demeanor, and familiarity with slaves and planters would stand out, but having the ability to calculate potential challenges, delegate, and plan for eventualities, as well as a history of success in other endeavours would be equally or more important. Craton saw the artisanal slaves and drivers in the Caribbean as being people with intelligence “who had risen to positions of authority, responsibility and confidentiality” through various means.¹⁵ Matthews provided a description of another characteristic inherent in such slaves in that “they had achieved some level of basic literacy and grasped every opportunity to tap into any discourse that pertained however remotely to their situation.”¹⁶

The two figures who emerged as being the principal slave leaders of the two rebellions which I have compared were Bussa of Barbados and Quamina of Demerara.¹⁷ These men possessed some, if not all, of the characteristics appropriate to a leader, including intelligence, influence, experience of physical locations, attributes such as literacy and depth of knowledge of those who held power (i.e., influential planters and officials), as well as a natural-born ability to

¹⁴ Ibid, 631-632.

¹⁵ Craton, *Empire, Enslavement & Freedom*, 298.

¹⁶ Matthews, 45.

¹⁷ Although Reverend John Smith was the most prominent figure in the Demerara incident, he was seen as being the white missionary instigator, and as such, stood out among others.

lead. Bussa was a ranger (essentially a sort of driver/overseer), while Jackey, another accused leader in Bussa's Rebellion, was a driver at another estate. Bussa had influential lieutenants, said to have been a carpenter, a mason, and a cooper. At another estate, Simon's, a ranger named John was accused, and as well, a woman named Nanny Grigg.¹⁸ Beckles, after identifying nineteen out of twenty-two of Bussa's lieutenants, placed all but five of these as drivers.¹⁹ In Demerara, both Quamina and Jack were deemed the two slaves at the heart of the Rebellion. While Quamina and Jack could certainly be considered elite slaves due to their skills, of the two, Quamina possessed more of the characteristics of a leader. He was a fully mature man, sober, calm in his reactions, and an intimate of Mr. and Mrs. Smith. He was also held in great esteem by the slave community. He had a questioning mind, as reflected by his early forays into Christianity where he asked difficult questions of the parson.²⁰ Yet, while Quamina appears to have been a sober, cautious man, his son was known for being opportunistic and restless, making him perhaps the more likely of the two to assume the mantle of leadership.

It is worth noting that both Quamina and Bussa were Africans, not Creoles. This is not surprising for Quamina, given the high percentage of African-born slaves still in Demerara at the time, but Bussa was, as has been demonstrated, part of a much smaller minority in Barbados. Craton noted that certain types of African slaves made natural choices for drivers – those of particular strength and “potency,” or of “chiefly lineage.” Quamina, as a church deacon, fit Craton's description of a Christianized African and their usual preference for Protestant sects such as the Baptists, rather than the established Anglican Church. Quamina was an artisan, but

¹⁸ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 260.

¹⁹ Paquette, 46.

²⁰ Reverend John Wray, *Journal*, September 10, 1808, as noted in da Costa, 104.

the qualities which he had in common with drivers fit another of Craton's observations that church deacons were often drawn "from the ranks of the plantation drivers."²¹

There was little mention of female participation in Bussa's and Demerara's Rebellions, except for one rather specific individual who shared certain characteristics in each rebellion. This slave seems to have played an important role, either as a rebelling slave, or a creation of white planters' imaginations and paranoia. In the case of Bussa's Rebellion, Nanny Grigg was a domestic in a great house. She claimed to be literate and reported news to other slaves which she said had come from newspapers – namely that emancipation was to come on New Year's Day and that whites were "very uneasy" about it. She urged slaves to cease work, taunting them "that they were all damned fools to work, for that she would not, as freedom they were sure to get." A slave later testified that when the New Year passed, Grigg informed them that freedom would come on Easter Monday and that they would have to fight to achieve it.²² In Demerara, an outstanding female slave of Nanny Grigg's fame did not feature, yet there was one who was notable. Whether she fulfilled a role that seems to have emerged during some slave rebellions is unknown, but her own testimony and that of others who named her should be examined in more detail than has otherwise been done, with the exception of da Costa who discussed her at some length.

Whether or not Susanna, the mistress of *Le Resouvenir's* manager, Hamilton, was as influential as she was made out to be during the trial is uncertain, but she certainly appears to have been an instigator of rebellious actions. Susanna shared with Nanny Grigg her placement as an insider in an estate household with access to information through her literacy and close

²¹ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 54-55.

²² "The Confession of Robert, a Slave belonging to the Plantation called 'Simmons,' *Report from a Select Committee*: 29-31, quoted in Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 260-261.

proximity to slave management. It is not clear whether Susanna was indeed literate, but she was certainly close to the manager. During the testimony of accused rebels, Susanna was said to have reported to slaves that her lover, the manager Hamilton, had told her that they were all to be freed, “but he [Hamilton] does not think they will give it to us unless all the sensible people went by force about it, and would not give it up without a positive promise from the governor.”²³

During Jack’s defense, he stated that Susanna, in relaying a message from Hamilton said that if the rebels were not a “parcel of cowards” they would have risen already.²⁴ Whether this message was meant to be given in Hamilton’s or Susanna’s wording, the purpose was certainly to infuriate the recipients into action. This is not to suggest that the figure of the female instigator did not exist, but the evidence regarding Susanna shown here was taken from testimony likely obtained under duress. Susanna’s own declaration reads as being less inflammatory, and likely to have been obtained under the same circumstances as the other slaves.²⁵ The presence of a female slave who had access to information obtained from white people or from blacks who had this type of intelligence to pass on is not surprising, but that there was one very specific such female character and not more, considering the number of black men who were implicated, seems rather strange. It is quite possible that whites, not realizing that there were numerous slaves around them absorbing information from their interchanges with other whites, saw a female domestic servant as a particular archetype.

²³ *Further Papers, viz, Return to an Address of the Honourable the [sic] House of Commons, dated 13th April, 1824*, Jack, of Success, Confession, 8th September, 1823, Proquest UK Parliamentary Papers: 39.

²⁴ *Ibid*, “Prisoner Jack’s Statement in Defense,” Proquest UK Parliamentary Papers: 76-77.

²⁵ *Further Papers, viz, Return to an Address of the Honourable the [sic] House of Commons, dated 13th April, 1824*, “Examination of Susanna, Hamilton’s Girl, 19th September, 1823,” Proquest UK Parliamentary Papers: 47; “Examination of Susanna, Hamilton’s Girl, 20th September, 1823,” 47; “Declaration of Susanna, Hamilton’s Girl, 29th September”, 1823: 48-49.

Fear of a powerful African or African-descended female rebel may harken back to Jamaica's heroine of the First Maroon War of 1734, Nanny of the Maroons. Jamaica's Nanny was rumoured to be a powerful and charismatic figure who served as an inspiration for rebel slaves.²⁶ It may be that white authorities had a fear of a strong black female character living in their midst, and was reflected in the characters of Nanny of the Maroons, Nanny Grigg, and Susannah in Demerara. Beckles compared the two Nannys in the context of a "heroic Feminism," noting that the official report on the 1816 rebellion in Barbados considered Grigg as having encouraged action in the manner of the Haitian Rebellion.²⁷ However accurate authorities' descriptions of Grigg and Susanna, it is quite possible that their own fears of specific black characters and characteristics were reflected in accusations and reports.

While both Bussa's and Demerara's Rebellions appear to have significant commonalities, two features of the 1823 Demerara Rebellion stand out as exceptional when compared to other slave rebellions in the Caribbean. One of these is that, as has been established, a white Englishman, John Smith, was named as the instigator of the Rebellion and was later perceived as a martyr to the cause of abolition at the hands of authorities in Demerara. The other aspect of the Rebellion which is exceptional is the number of slaves reported that were actively involved in the incident and the fact that these consisted of all of the slaves on the East Coast. There are differences in how this is expressed, with some historians being more cautious than other sources of information, yet there are questions as to how numbers were calculated. It is possible that due to misunderstanding, repeating rumours and gossip, or by deliberately inflating numbers to excuse officials' poor decisions, some early tale-bearers of the Rebellion inflated numbers or

²⁶ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 81.

²⁷ Hilary McD. Beckles "Historicizing Slavery in West Indian Feminisms," *Feminist Review*, No. 59, Rethinking Caribbean Difference (Summer, 1998): 34-56, 46.

claimed incorrectly that all the slaves rebelled. This perceived narrative may have caused historians and others to have overlooked a more complex perspective of differences in individual slaves' points of view. This section will attempt to identify whether or not "all" the slaves on the East Coast were involved in the Rebellion and how many slaves were present, by using a number of sources and calculations. If "all" the slaves did revolt, this would be extraordinary in that it would mean that every man, woman, and child, no matter how young or old, weak or infirm, rose against the planters. This would also suggest that every slave was willing to risk their own and the lives of their families on an unknown outcome, and that each saw only one solution to their difficult lives. Discovering the true number of slaves involved would allow historians to assess far more accurately the degree to which rebellious slaves influenced others, how the uprising had been planned, which slaves were most invested in the Rebellion, and most important to this thesis, a more accurate picture of the slaves of Demerara as thinking human beings with a level of sophistication long ignored. A discovery of whether the numbers were inflated, by whom, and to whose advantage would also provide a clearer view of white chroniclers, whether an exaggeration of the number of slaves actively rebelling was a deliberate attempt to excuse the violence which met the rebels at the time, or if it was an example of a misplaced vision of slave solidarity.

The most often-cited number of slaves involved has been anywhere from 9,000 to 13,000, or the entire slave population of the East Coast of Demerara. In her introduction to *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, da Costa wrote that "ten to twelve thousand slaves rose up in the name of their 'rights.'"²⁸ Later in the book, the author stated that "the rebels could easily gather from 10,000 to 12,000," and elsewhere that the governor "calculated that around 9,000 slaves had

²⁸ Da Costa, xiii.

risen more or less at the same time, in different parts of the East Coast.”²⁹ Craton stated in *Testing the Chains* that troops “discovered that virtually all the 12,000 slaves on the East Coast were rebelling.” In *Empire, Enslavement & Freedom*, published thirteen years after *Testing the Chains*, Craton more than doubled the number of slaves, saying that “perhaps 30,000 slaves were affected in all.”³⁰ His use of the word “affected,” rather than saying that this number of slaves were “involved,” is confusing as he did not elaborate on what he meant by the term. Later he definitively stated that 30,000 “rose up”. He explained that: “This provoked the Guianese slaves, 30,000 of whom, from over 60 estates on a 30-mile stretch of eastern Demerara, rose up on Monday, August 18, 1823.”³¹ Christa Dierksheide, in *Amelioration and Empire*, gave the number of rebels as 13,000.³² In other books and articles, historians do not always provide numbers, but they agree that it was a large-scale confrontation, while other sources, aimed at a general readership, tend to state the numbers as being above 9,000.³³ Genovese, using the Demerara Rebellion as an example in from *Rebellion to Revolution*, said that “thousands” had been involved, with “two thousand in one major battle.”³⁴ This presumably refers to the meeting between Colonel Leahy and the group identified by Bryant and Murray as the “rebel force” and the “rendezvous of the disaffected.”³⁵ The primary sources indicate that the writer believed at

²⁹ Ibid, 217, 222. In an endnote the author refers to a “Schedule A” attached to papers respecting the Rebellion. I will examine these in detail later in this chapter.

³⁰ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 284; *Empire, Enslavement & Freedom*, 289.

³¹ Craton, *Empire, Enslavement & Freedom*, 314.

³² Dierksheide, 192. It is unclear where she obtained this number, as the citation which follows the next sentence does not appear to refer to the number of slaves involved.

³³ See, for example, the following which were obtained on the first page of a Google search:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demerara_rebellion_of_1823 <http://www.blackpast.org/gah/demerara-rebellion-1823> <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/demerara.htm> <http://www.guyana.org/features/guyanastory/chapter43.html> <https://www.thingsguyana.com/the-1823-demerara-rebellion/>.

³⁴ Genovese, 35.

³⁵ Murray, *Official Account*, 53, 58.

the time that this group consisted of all, or nearly all, the rebels. This was not a battle, but a parley gone horribly wrong.

Although I examined primary source materials which were produced by white planters and officials who were active during the Rebellion, I was not able to ascertain where previously-stated numbers of slave rebels were obtained. The non-scholarly articles noted above do not provide sources for their information; one would assume they were originally obtained either by using Michael Craton and/or Emilia da Costa (the earliest of these publications being Craton in an article in 1979), or others simply picked up these numbers and descriptions, or the information was obtained via popular stories.³⁶ What is curious is where da Costa and Craton found their information. Da Costa did not provide a citation as to where these numbers came from. In the calculation which she attributed to the Governor, there is mention of a “bulletin,” but without specifics as to which bulletin or where it can be found. Da Costa provided a reference to the rebels’ potential for gathering 10,000 to 12,000 slaves which states that “estimates at the time [which] show that about 13,000 slaves were involved. ‘Schedule A. Exhibiting the Number of Estates Whose Negroes Were Engaged in the Rebellion’” (see Table 5.1)³⁷ I have been unable to locate a source for Craton’s information; he offers no citation.

³⁶ Craton, *Empire, Enslavement & Freedom*, 282.

³⁷ Da Costa, 362-363.

Table 5.1. Schedule A to Deposition of Alexander Simpson.

INSURRECTION OF SLAVES IN DEMERARA.

15

SCHEDULE (A.)

EXHIBITING the number of Estates whose Negroes were engaged in the Rebellion.

NAME of ESTATE.	Number of Negroes.	EVIDENCE.	BY WHOM EXAMINED.
Foulis - - -	148	Whitlock - - -	Court martial - - trial of Murphy.
Good Hope - - -	445	John Laurey - - -	Court martial - - trial of Harry.
Golden Grove - - -	259	Thomas Freeman - - -	Court martial - - trial of Nelson.
- - - - -	- - -	Gainsford - - -	Court martial - - trial of Sandy.
Plaisance - - -	184	Wm. Mercer - - -	Court martial - - trial of Damis.
Enterprize - - -	- - -	- - - - -	- - - - -
Bachelors Adventure } - - -	661	John Pollard & Hugh Rogers	Court martial - - trial of Natty.
- - - - -	- - -	Adonis - - -	Court martial - - trial of Scipio.
Beter Hope - - -	196	Wm. Mercer - - -	Court martial - - trial of Lewis.
Coldingen - - -	183	Coppy and Ned - - -	Court martial - - trial of Alick and Sam Wm.
Lusignan - - -	443	Coppy - - -	Court martial - - trial of Alick and Sam Wm.
- - - - -	- - -	John - - -	Court martial - - trial of Cudjo, Sammy and Alex.
Triumph - - -	176	Edward Hughes - - -	Court martial - - trial of Edward and Fingal.
La Bonne Intention - - -	301	Cale - - -	Court martial - - trial of Edward and Fingal.
Porters Hope - - -	322	J. Carcon - - -	Court martial - - trial of Cudjo.
Success - - -	332	Wm. Smith - - -	Court martial - - trial of Frank and Windsor.
Beter Verwagting - - -	137	Isaac - - -	Court martial - - trial of Cobus and Quintus.
Nonpareil - - -	228	Mr. Austin - - -	Court martial - - trial of Sandy.
Enmore - - -	268	William - - -	Court martial - - trial of Mercury.
Paradise - - -	270	Stephen - - -	Court martial - - trial of Gilbert.
New Orange Nassau - - -	181	Cuffy - - -	Court martial - - trial of Nelson.
Friendship - - -	138	Schmidt - - -	Court martial - - trial of Nelson.
- - - - -	- - -	Schmidt - - -	Court martial - - trial of Smith.
Nocten Zuyl - - -	133	Billy - - -	Court martial - - trial of Quamine.
Chateau Margo - - -	224	George Maussion - - -	Court martial - - trial of Tom and Quabinna.
Clonbrook - - -	362	Simon Rogers - - -	Court martial - - trial of Field.
Haslinton - - -	206	Charles Grant - - -	Court martial - - trial of Quamine.
North Brook - - -	279	Charles Grant and Brutus	Court martial - - trial of Quamine.
Cove - - -	- - -	- - - - -	- - - - -
John - - -	272	Quamine - - -	Court martial - - trial of Austin.
Mon Repos - - -	- - -	- - - - -	- - - - -
Endraght - - -	496	James Keane - - -	Court martial - - trial of Jack of Success.
Bellefield - - -	61	Charles Grant - - -	Court martial - - trial of Jack of Success.
Bailey's Hope - - -	290	Gordon - - -	Court martial - - trial of Joseph.
Le Resouvenir - - -	387	Peter - - -	Board of evidence, 7th October.
- - - - -	- - -	Merchison - - -	Board of evidence, 16th September.
Elizabeth Hall - - -	199	Peter - - -	Board of evidence, 3d September.
Nabacis - - -	287	Tom Gibson - - -	Board of evidence, 16th September.
Vrieds Lust - - -	249	Bob - - -	Board of evidence.
Montrose - - -	302	Bob - - -	Board of evidence.
Vigilance - - -	216	J. G. Abbott - - -	Board of evidence.
Turkeyan - - -	180	J. M'Kenzie - - -	Board of evidence.

Although the foregoing list comprises all the estates on the east coast, of which the negroes are proved to have been in actual rebellion, it must be observed, that the precaution taken by the rebels to avoid detection, by sending the people from one estate to seize the whites, and take away the arms of another, renders it impossible to identify all those who were engaged in the revolt; and accordingly it will be seen, that almost every witness who was present at any scene of outrage in the disturbed district, says, that the negroes concerned, and known to him or her, were accompanied by crowds of strangers; this circumstance, and the number in which the insurgents appeared in various places from Monday night till Wednesday following, leave little doubt that some, at least, of the negroes of all estates from Plantation Grove, at Mahaica, to Plantation Thomas, adjoining the town, including a population of nearly thirteen thousand slaves, took part in assisting in the rebellion.

c 2

The primary sources that historians have relied on for narratives of the 1823 rebellion were created exclusively by white Europeans. Depending on whose view the writer reflected, whether military, client or patron to the planter élite, or representatives of abolitionists, they are generally in agreement on specific facts. The account which seems to be used most often in studies and descriptions of the active phase of the Rebellion, i.e., the movement of troops and the rebels' actions, is that of Joshua Bryant. The popularity of his account is likely the result of several features: 1) Bryant was a resident of Demerara and knew the area well; 2) The writer and painter was an intimate of many of the planters and had access to informants' first-hand experiences of the Rebellion; 3) His skills were such that he could portray a vivid and lively description; and 4) His account was written soon after the Rebellion and published the following year before memories faded. Unfortunately for historians, the very reasons for Bryant's popularity are also reasons to be particularly assiduous in critiquing his publication. As an English painter of landscapes and portraiture, and a resident of Demerara, Bryant was a client of the plantation aristocracy and sympathetic to their point of view vis-à-vis slavery. As a result of his client status and, very likely, his artistic flair for description, his narrative was written in a style which can be described as "fevered." He used turns of phrase, extensive footnotes which reflected further white opinions, and in some cases guesses in order to depict a British military force fighting off an enormous group of armed and ferocious rebels. The language he used in a description of rebels in "great numbers" and pages of foot-notes of florid statements from witnesses combined to present a picture of white bravery and determination in the face of savage opposition.³⁸

³⁸ See, for example, Bryant, 21-30.

Other sources which I have relied upon are trial transcripts, and reports from Governor Murray directly following the Rebellion, and from Edwin Angel Wallbridge whose description was written over two decades later. Obviously, the potential problems with the latter two sources are that Governor Murray would not make an official report which would in any way discredit his or his men's actions, and Wallbridge represented the interests of Christian groups who saw Smith as a martyr to the abolitionist cause. Yet each of these sources provide useful information. Murray gave succinct military-style reports without embellishment and written directly after the event when memories were fresh. Wallbridge, writing much later, had access to sources not available immediately after the Rebellion such as the debates in the House of Commons of 1824, as well as memories of others not directly implicated in the Rebellion at the time.

Slave testimony features prominently within the court martial proceedings, although they need to be considered with care. These were the slaves who were on trial for their lives and there is no reason to suppose they gave this testimony free from coercion. Historian Natalie Zacek described slaves' legal position in the British Caribbean as "liminal" because they could not testify against free persons, although they were able to testify against other slaves.³⁹ Zacek pointed out that Smith's trial following the Demerara Rebellion was one of only two cases within North American and Caribbean law where slaves' testimony was used to convict a white person, the other case being in Tortola in 1811.⁴⁰ According to Zacek, in both these cases planters wished to rid themselves of a troublesome white man who they felt endangered their supremacy. In Smith's case, the author stated: "it seems clear that the Demerara court not merely allowed slaves to testify against Smith, but coerced them into doing so," adding that the alleged leader of

³⁹ Natalie Zacek, "Voices and Silences: The Problem of Slave Testimony in the English West Indian Law Court," *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (March 2008): 24-39, 25.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 29.

the revolt (Jack Gladstone) received a stay of execution in return for his damning testimony of Smith.⁴¹ Captured slaves accused of being rebels could be convinced to agree with and express in testimony what their white captors believed to have occurred according to their own expectations and prejudices. Coercion could take more than one form than that of torture. The settings wherein questioning was conducted could be helpful to the questioners in getting expected and desired answers from captive slaves. “Whipping, incarceration, deportation and execution ... [slaves] had a strong incentive to alter their testimony in order to ameliorate subsequent punishment.”⁴²

Within the primary sources, there is a Schedule “F” included with the “further documents” that supplies testimony of accused slaves stating that all the slaves in the colony were to rise. One of slaves said that he “couldn’t account for the reasons” why the entire population had not risen.⁴³ There are numerous referrals to an “open rebellion” during the trial, but it does not seem to imply that every slave took part. As well as there being a lack of references to female rebels, and certainly none for children, sources clearly state that some slaves did not join the Rebellion, some defending and even freeing their masters. As to where the idea that all the slaves rebelled and which has become somewhat of a legend of Demerara, it may be that it grew out of a statement from John Smith. On August 20, 1823 Smith wrote a letter to a friend in which he stated that “[t]he Negroes are all in open rebellion on this coast.”⁴⁴ Only his

⁴¹ Ibid, 32. It should be noted that Zacek appears to have gained her knowledge of Smith’s case almost entirely from a cursory reading of da Costa. This is the only direct reference to the Demerara Rebellion which she cited. Zacek stated that the trial was held in June of 1824, whereas this was the date of the debate in the House of Commons; Smith was long dead by then. Nevertheless, her note of the exceptionality of slave testimony against a white man is valid.

⁴² Justin Behrend, “Rebellious Talk and Conspiratorial Plots: The Making of a Slave Insurrection in Civil War Natchez,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (February, 2011): 17-52, 19.

⁴³ *Further Papers, With Minutes of Trials*, 21.

⁴⁴ House of Commons, *Debate*, 31..

use of the word “all” might indicate such a conclusion, and other than this, there appears to be no original source for the idea that every slave had rebelled. While it may be said that this was merely a turn of phrase, this is not the way in which it has been presented.

While “all” the slaves rising may be used as a way of expressing “a large number” in a non-academic setting, there remains the question of how many did rebel. There does not seem to be a definitive answer in the original narratives, nor within other sources directly connected with the Rebellion at the time. Referring to the earlier-noted Schedule A noted by da Costa, an explanation included in the Schedule declares that this “comprises all the estates on the east coast, of which the negroes are proved to have been in actual rebellion.”⁴⁵ It also provided the information that it was “impossible to identify all those who were engaged in the revolt ... the negroes concerned ... were accompanied by crowds of strangers ... leave[s] little doubt that some, at least, of the negroes of all estates from Plantation Grove, at Mahaica, to Plantation Thomas, adjoining the town, including a population of nearly thirteen thousand slaves, took part in assisting in the rebellion.”⁴⁶ This illustrates that “some, at least” of the slaves took part, and that it was impossible to identify all who did. The list shows only those plantations on the East Coast to which it was stated that rebelling slaves belonged. The Schedule is described in a letter to the Governor’s Secretary, also named John Murray, from William Leach, Secretary, as being “an account of those estates of which the negroes are proved to have been engaged in the revolt; with a statement of their population, and a reference to the evidence on which the account is founded.”⁴⁷ This Schedule also shows that thirty-three slaves were examined by officials. There does not appear to be any claims of slaves from other plantations or from Georgetown as being

⁴⁵ *Further Papers, With Minutes of Trials*, 15.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 14.

rebels. From this, it seems that the number of slaves who were resident on plantations to which rebels belonged was 9,015. It appears that the entire population of plantations to which accused rebels were attached was included in the “Number of Negroes” list (this would presumably include women and children). Without a list of the number of slaves registered for each specific plantation on the East Coast in 1823, it is not possible to obtain precise numbers.⁴⁸

A table showing slave populations divided by parish and sex in Demerara-Essiquibo in 1826 and a map which indicates that the parishes of St. Mary and St. Paul were the area of active rebellion indicates a total population of the area in 1826 as being 17,515 (see Figure 5.1 and Table 5.2).⁴⁹ The table presenting natural increase/decrease of the slave population of Demerara-Essiquibo from 1829-1832 shows a natural increase/decrease per 1,000 as -14.3.⁵⁰ This indicates that the slave population of the two parishes involved in the Rebellion would have decreased by approximately 243 people, demonstrating that the slave population in 1823 would have been around 17,758. Presumably, this population includes every enslaved man, woman, and child, excluding any who were unregistered. This is edging closer to the 20,000 slaves sometimes stated to have lived on the East Coast. There is no indication that any slaves from Georgetown were involved, which might have swelled the ranks. (Georgetown is shown as being in St. George parish.) Bryant referred to an alarm being sounded in the town at about one o’clock one afternoon, but this turned out to be in error, the slaves from adjoining plantation *Thomas* merely being on their way to work in a nearby cane field.⁵¹

⁴⁸ This list may exist, but it is not digitized and appears to be in the National Archives in England, somewhere in files T 71/406 – T71/413. A cost estimate for providing copies of these files was given as approximately £500.

⁴⁹ Higman, 425; xxxiii.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 310.

⁵¹ Bryant, 46.

Figure 5.1. Location of parishes of St. Mary and St. Paul in which Rebellion was contained.

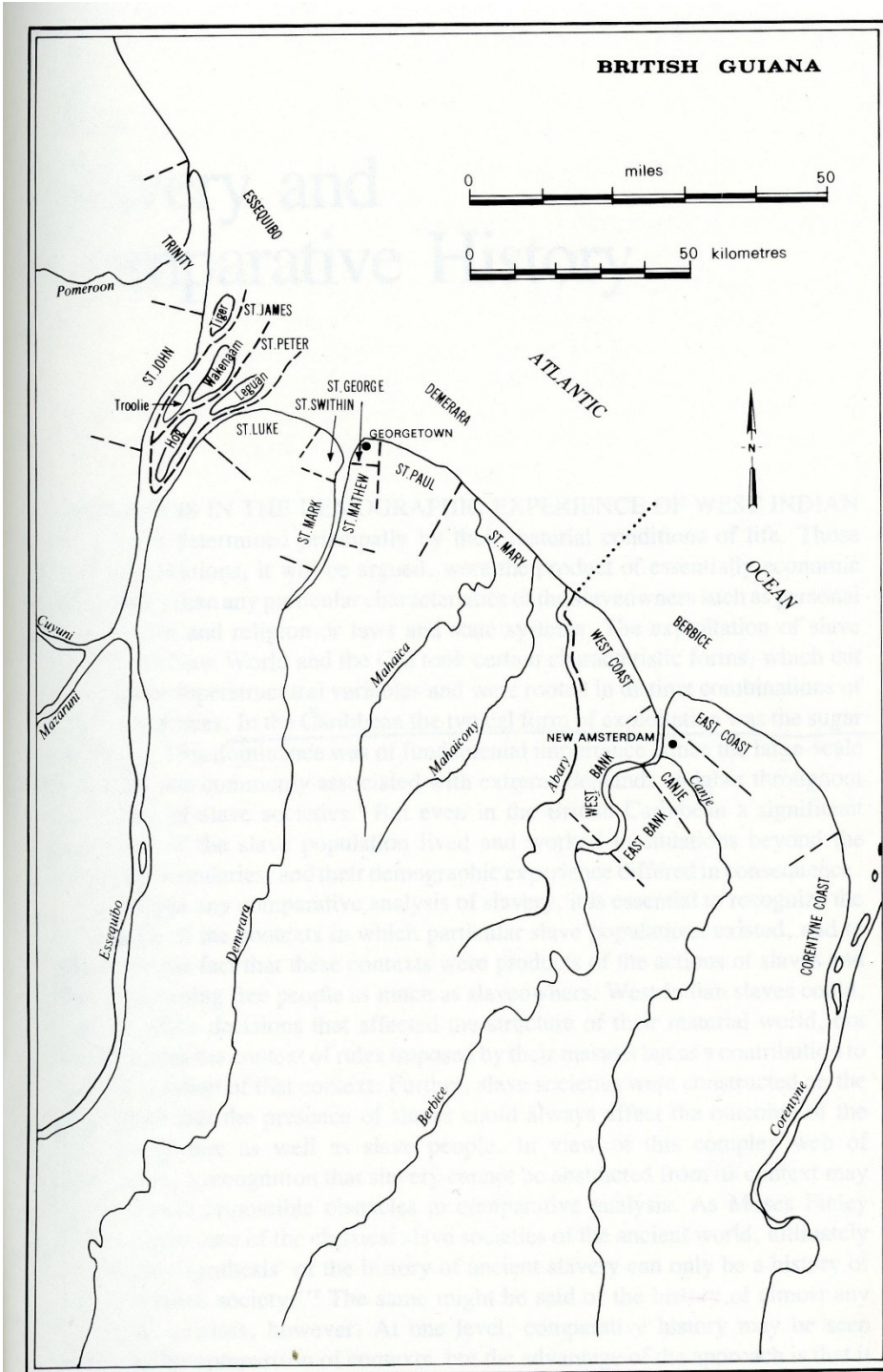


Fig. 1.8. *British Guiana c.1831: Parishes.* (Sources: *M.C.P.D.E.*, 1825, vol. 2, p. 660; *ibid.*, 1826, vol. 2, p. 165; *Demerara Vade-mecum*, 1821, pp. 73-76.)

Source: Higman, xxxiii

Table 5.2. Number of slaves per parish *circa* 1826 and 1832.

NUMBER OF SLAVES PER PARISH AND SEX:
DEMARARA-ESSIQUIBO, 1826 AND 1832

Parish	1826			1832		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
St. Mary	4,002	3,175	7,177	3,394	2,907	6,301
St. Paul	5,487	4,851	10,338	4,510	4,262	8,772
St. George	3,645	3,230	6,875	3,993	4,040	8,033
St. Matthew	3,762	3,277	7,039	2,934	2,670	5,604
St. Mark	3,137	2,553	5,690	2,570	2,063	4,633
St. Swithin	2,681	2,228	4,809	2,059	1,851	3,910
St. Luke	3,444	2,798	6,242	2,930	2,605	5,535
St. Peter	3,309	2,850	6,159	3,015	2,872	5,887
St. James	2,419	2,047	4,466	2,126	2,040	4,166
St. John	2,624	2,191	4,815	2,471	2,146	4,617
The Trinity	4,348	3,424	7,772	4,347	3,712	8,059
Total	38,758	32,624	71,382	34,349	31,168	65,517

Source: Higman, 425.

It seems that evidence for da Costa's claim of easily gathering up to 12,000 slaves must remain a mystery. It could be argued that it might have been possible to gather this number, but evidence does not support it. Writing of the aftermath of the active rebellion, da Costa portrayed Murray as engaging in "psychological warfare" as demonstrated by bulletins issued by him warning of what would befall rebel slaves who did not turn themselves in. In discussing these bulletins, da Costa wrote of Murray: "He calculated that around 9,000 slaves had risen more or less at the same time, in different parts of the East Coast."⁵² Unfortunately, she did not explain

⁵² Da Costa, 222.

where Murray's calculation was to be found, and it has not appeared in any of the documentation examined for this thesis. It may be that she was referring to the Schedule A described above, which passed between Murray's Secretary and that of William Leach.⁵³ The question of how many slaves actually rebelled remains somewhat open. In *Empire, Enslavement & Freedom* Craton said that the Rebellion "spread to over 50 estates."⁵⁴ Bryant said that the rebels were active from approximately plantation *Plaisance*, four miles from Georgetown, to *Clonbrook*, near Mahaica, which covered "about forty plantations."⁵⁵ In a list of plantations on the East Coast provided by Bryant, there are sixty-five listed (see Table 5.3).⁵⁶ The thirty-seven plantations noted in Schedule A to Alexander Simpson's deposition provides a total of 9,015 slaves out of a possible total of 17,758 (calculating from Higman's 1826 records of the two relevant parishes). This represents 50.8 percent of the two parishes involved. The thirty-seven plantations listed represents 56.9 percent of the total of sixty-five plantations listed by Bryant. This indicates that over half the plantations of the East Coast were represented, and that just over half the entire population of all sixty-five plantations were implicated. It seems quite plausible that 9,015 represents just over half the entire slave population of the two parishes, but evidence for this being an accurate number of actively rebelling slaves is sparse.

⁵³ *Further Papers, With Minutes of Trials*, 15.

⁵⁴ Craton, *Empire, Enslavement & Freedom*, 289.

⁵⁵ Bryant, 13.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 115.

Table 5.3. List of Plantations on East Coast of Demerara.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLATES.

Plate First,

Is a Map of that part of the Colony of Demerara, to which the Insurrection was confined—representing the Estates on the East Coast of the River, with other Plantations adjoining. For the purpose of avoiding that confusion which so often arises from too many references, the Plantations are alternately numbered, and are as follows :—

PLANTATIONS ON THE COAST, FROM FORT WILLIAM FREDERICK TO MAHAICA CREEK.

1 Thomas	34 Friendship
2 Kitty	35 Vigilance
3 Blygezight	36 Strathspey
4 Bel Air	37 Coldingen
5 Sophia	38 Nonpareil
6 Leliendaal	39 Enterprise
7 Pattenzen	40 Elizabeth Hall
8 Turkeyen and Henrietta	41 Bachelor's Adventure
9 Cuming's Lodge	42 Paradise
10 Industry	43 Foulis
11 Wittenburg	44 Porter's Hope
12 Le Reduit	45 Enmore
13 Goede Verwagting	46 Haslington
14 Plaisance	47 Golden Grove
15 Beeter Hoop	48 Nabaclis
16 Vryheid's Lust	49 Jehn
17 Brothers	50 Cove
18 Montrose	51 Craig Miln
19 Felicity	52 Northbrook
20 Le Resouvenir	53 Bellefield
21 Success	54 Noot en Zuyl
22 Chateau Margo	55 Lowlands
23 La Bonne Intention	56 Hope
24 Beeter Verwagting	57 Dochfour
25 Triumph	58 Ann's Grove
26 Mon Repos	59 Clonbrook
27 Eendragt	60 Beehive
28 Good Hope	61 Greenfield
29 Two Friends and Nog Eens	62 Orange Nassau
30 Lusignan	63 Grove
31 Annandale	64 Unity
32 La Reconnoissance	65 Lancaster.
33 New Orange Nassau	

Source: Bryant, 115.

Narratives of Bussa's Rebellion are not known for claiming that all the slaves on dozens of plantations rebelled, but Beckles provided an example which may be of assistance in considering the percentage and number of rebel slaves in a rebellion for comparative purposes.⁵⁷ He considered that the area in which Bussa's Rebellion occurred had a slave population of approximately 36,700. Of this, fifty-four percent were female and forty-six percent male.⁵⁸ Of this forty-six percent (16,982), he estimated that thirty percent were either over sixty years of age or under sixteen, which would leave about 11,887 males able to bear arms.⁵⁹ He then used data to calculate "tentatively" that no more than thirty percent of these had taken up arms. This meant that about 3,900 male slaves engaged in armed combat against a militia and regular army of about 4,000.⁶⁰ As it appears happened in Demerara, Beckles noted that there was no evidence of women taking up arms, although there were women involved in the organization stage.⁶¹ Bearing in mind that each colony was a distinctly separate colony with its own characteristics, this example serves to demonstrate a likely approximation for active slave rebels. In the case of Demerara, the same type of formula might be used to suggest how many of the slaves actively rose against the white planters. According to calculations made in Chapter 2, approximately fifty-five percent of Demerara slaves were male. If there were 9,015 slaves on the thirty-seven plantations indicated in Simpson's Schedule A, approximately 4,960 of these were male. B. W. Higman reported that in "British Guiana" eighty-four percent or higher were active in the labour force. (He excluded children under six years of age or adults over seventy, as well as "diseased, or otherwise non-effective.")⁶² If Higman's definition of "active in the labour force" is used

⁵⁷ Beckles, "Slave-drivers' War," 94-95.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 94.

⁵⁹ Beckles states "12,887," however, 70 percent of 16,982 is 11,887. Ibid, 95.

⁶⁰Ibid, 95.

⁶¹ Ibid, 95.

⁶² Higman, 46.

here, out of 4,960 men 4,166 would be healthy enough to be available as labourers and therefore healthy enough to be potential rebels. Beckles, however, disqualified children under sixteen years of age being active rebels; it seems more likely, considering the age in which young people took on adult roles, that those under twelve or fourteen would be more unlikely to take part. He also disqualified slaves over sixty as being active participants. Precise numbers for the appropriate age group in Demerara are not available for our purposes, but using Beckles' thirty percent of slaves who were unable to be active in a rebellion, the feasible number of slaves taking part in the Demerara Rebellion would be seventy percent of 4,960, or 3,472 rebels. If Beckles further tentative calculation that no more than thirty percent of this group in Barbados were able to take up arms were applied, 1,042 would be an approximate number of slaves in Demerara who would be actively involved; however, since the reason for this last further thirty percent calculation is unknown, I will not apply it for the purposes of this thesis (see my calculations, Table 5.4). While there is a considerable discrepancy between numbers based upon Higman's definition of active labourers, and Beckles' idea of who would be of the right age to rebel, this is far closer to the size of the crowd who gathered at *Bachelor's Adventure* and suggested by contemporary reports of this being the meeting place of all the rebels. Bryant considered this number to be around 2,500, while the young clerk Cheveley suggested between 3,000 and 4,000.⁶³

⁶³ Bryant, 33; Murray, *Official Account*, 53; London Missionary Society Archive, *Journal of John Cheveley*, as noted in da Costa, 220.

Table 5.4. Calculations of Number of Potential Rebels.

CALCULATIONS APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF REBELS	
Total slave population St. Mary and St. Paul parishes, Demerara 1826 (See Figure 4.2)	17,515
Natural increase/decrease = -14.3 per 1,000	<u>243</u>
Total slave population St Mary and St. Paul parishes, Demerara 1823 calculated from above per Higman	17,758
Total plantations on East Coast per Bryant (See Figure 4.2)	65
Plantations where accused rebels resided per Alexander Simpson (See Table 4.1)	<u>37</u>
Percent plantations with slaves accused	56.9%
Number of slaves resident on 37 plantations involved (See Table 4.1)	9,015
Percent of 9,015 slaves who were male based on population numbers In <i>Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine</i> (See Chapter 2)	<u>55%</u>
Number of males on 37 plantations involved based on above	4,960
Percent of males who were part of active labour force per Higman	<u>84%</u>
Total active labour force (males)/potential rebels	4,166
Percent of males who were part of active labour force per Beckles	<u>70%</u>
Total active labour force (males)/potential rebels per Beckles	3,472
Calculated number of slaves active in Rebellion: 3,472 - 4,166	

Aside from one comment in Smith's letter, written when he was at *Le Resouvenir* during the Rebellion, there does not seem to be any written primary source material that points to anyone who either claimed that all the slaves were rebelling because they actually believed that was the case, or that they had deliberately exaggerated. The Rebellion was undoubtedly large in scale, but the evidence for a complete revolt of every enslaved man, woman, and child on the East Coast is unsound. The following considers what was established by contemporaries of the various white authority figures in Demerara as to their trustworthiness and other character flaws and whether these traits may have had some effect on how numbers were reported.

It is possible that after the trials of Smith and accused slaves were over, the size of the Rebellion was expanded to far more than double the highest estimate given at the time by Cheveley and others in an effort to excuse the excessive force which was engaged by the militia and regular military. Governor Murray had to have been aware that his incompetence had been noticed in Britain. There were the “admonishments” which da Costa noted, the ongoing legal battle with William Rough, accusations of being under the influence of McTurk and other significant planters, and he was known to not respond promptly to official documents, including orders from Britain.⁶⁴ The blistering commentary of the House of Commons the following year and Murray’s failure to obtain another posting reflects much of the mood in Britain toward slavery, including many at the highest levels.

There is evidence that some of the original sources exaggerated, or at the very least, used a choice of words geared toward an exciting retelling of the story. Bryant, in particular, tended toward this with his descriptions of the military, “a most dreadful yell, resembling a war-whoop [the most dreadful he ever heard],” “licentious fury,” and so on, although the numbers of insurgents and defenders he noted do not seem to be out of line. During Smith’s court martial, the narrative tended toward the overwrought, as indicated in the exchange with McTurk over Smith’s supposed “violent manner.” If Murray and others who were allies did suggest inflated numbers, it is not surprising that they would want to convey a perception of a massive force on the side of the rebels in order to justify actions taken against the slaves and Smith. Yet there is

⁶⁴ Murray’s non-response continued after the trial, as evidenced in further commentary on the House of Commons debates where it is revealed that a planter by the name of Hopkinson had laid charges against a Captain Spencer for his behaviour during the Rebellion which lay unaddressed by the Governor for some time. House of Commons, *Debate*, vi-xi.

no evidence in official documents of this occurring, despite examples of agitated and inflammatory language present in court martial testimony and Bryant's published narrative.

As far as modern assertions of these enormous numbers can be understood, the question is why this unproven information remains in consistent use. Reasons may include the same sort of excitement cultivated by Bryant in his narrative, assertions of slaves' agency in an attempted overturn of white oppression, or simply picking up the most available number, which in turn carried forward the inflated totals. From the beginning, a fevered retelling of the story may have increased the size; "all" the slaves rebelling is quicker and more stirring than an explanation that a great many, representing most of the plantations, had arisen. Everyone being in an armed revolt for freedom is also simpler and more rousing than an explanation that some may have been demonstrating for better working conditions.

Secondary sources also use language that causes the reader to envision a more violent action on the part of the slaves. Genovese, as noted earlier, used the term "major battle" to denote a parley gone wrong, referred to slaves "executing" two white men who, in fact, were victims in an exchange of fire, and said that the colony "went up in flames" when one fire in a brush pile and another in a sheep pen were reported, but there was no mention of the kind of destruction by fire that occurred in Barbados.⁶⁵ Although Genovese was undoubtedly using a figure of speech, when putting it to use in this instance when other rebellions did indeed result in tremendous fire damage, it results in an incorrect assumption being placed in the mind of a less-informed reader. Considering that the event was one of the more notable slave uprisings in the

⁶⁵ Genovese, 35, 34; Bryant, 4, 6, 42.

Americas and contained more than enough exciting circumstances, it is curious how certain aspects are embroidered to focus on the idea of slaves wildly rebelling in an unrestrained way.

Aside from encouraging an erroneous assumption, such statements assume that the slaves of Demerara all agreed to one massive armed demand for freedom, perhaps doing a disservice to their understandings of law, sense of self-reliance, sophistication, and self-control. Da Costa maintained that most of the slaves had not known of the conspiracy to rebel until the day prior to the act, and that the vast majority had joined after being accused of cowardice, beaten and harassed by the conspirators, then dragged along with the rebels.⁶⁶ While this likely happened in some cases, there are also descriptions of slaves standing up to the insurgents and freeing their masters, and suggesting that slaves were usually coerced into joining the rebellion ignores individuals' own decisions. Slaves no doubt had specific grievances as well as being generally opposed to their situation. Considering specifics acknowledges the depth of slaves' experiences and considers one of the major questions regarding the Rebellion: What exactly was this event, a rebellion to overthrow slavery, a labour protest to change the conditions of daily work, or were there variations in goals depending on the slave in question?

While arguing that most of the Demerara slaves were forced to join the uprising, da Costa also stated that the same slaves who were not involved in the planning stage were not clear on what they were fighting for.⁶⁷ If the insurgent slaves were indeed the rabble they were portrayed as being, the narratives of Bryant *et al* do not support this theory. Da Costa did not make clear what her source was in writing that most of the slaves were beaten and harassed into joining the active group. If, as may be expected, she drew on trial testimony, such statements are unreliable.

⁶⁶ Da Costa, 202.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 203.

These slave witnesses' lives were in peril and they were, in essence, testifying on behalf of the colonial authorities. The way in which the story of the Demerara Rebellion has been depicted by both historians and non-academics has in many cases been focused on the size of the assembled rebel force and that it was made up of every slave on Demerara's East Coast.⁶⁸ The imagery has been of a mob bent on the overthrow of their oppressors, and as much as we may today wish for such an event, to place this image at the core of the story is to downscale the event's complexity and true importance in the history of slavery in the Americas. When Lieutenant Colonel Leahy met the group he estimated as consisting of around 2,000 slaves near *Bachelor's Adventure* he asked them what they wanted – to which their ready answer was “two days in the week, and some of them said three” and then “their freedom – that the King had sent it out – and that they *would be free.*”⁶⁹ All this is an indication of more than one agenda.

An anecdote about John Smith and his wife provides an illustration of the Demerara whites' attitude toward lower labouring classes as an example of how unsophisticated and unlearned they saw even members of their own race. The distance of one level of white society from another within the plantation environment, while not as extreme as with slaves, could still be shocking. The intense class snobbery shown by Murray and McTurk was not confined to private thought and discussion. Following Smith's death from consumption while he was in prison, his wife was left penniless and essentially reliant on charity to make her way back to England, while the *Guiana Chronicle* printed the following commentary:

This is no doubt enough for the only rational purpose to which it can be applied, and that is to place the woman in some grocer or grocery haberdasher's shop, where she may earn

⁶⁸ See, for example, in addition to academic sources cited, Black Past.org: <http://www.blackpast.org/gah/demerara-rebellion-1823>; Guyana.org, The Demerara Slave Uprising: <http://www.guyana.org/features/guyanastory/chapter43.html>; “The 1823 Demerara Rebellion,” *Things Guyana*, August 1, 2016: <https://www.thingsguyana.com/the-1823-demerara-rebellion/> .

⁶⁹ Bryant, 33.

an honest livelihood as we presume (although one writes in ignorance of the fact) that such a solution would be the most fitting for her from the station in life in which she has been brought up as we cannot for a moment imagine that any women, but of the lowest class would have been the wife of such an illiterate, low bred man as Demerara's Smith was known to be.⁷⁰

Such extremely derogatory opinions toward labouring classes, while not uncommon, did not reflect the popularity of current movements within Britain itself. The move toward fairer and more humane labour conditions was inextricably entwined with Protestant dissenters in the nineteenth century, including the missionaries to the Caribbean. An article from the *Christian Observer* published in 1824 asked its readers to consider the differing responses to English labourers on strike with the Demerara slaves' fate when they did much the same.⁷¹ The purpose of the article was to convey the excessive force with which the Demerara authorities responded to what was essentially a protest against unfair (to an extreme) treatment of labourers and reflects that at the time the British population was seeing commonalities between slaves and the working class. Da Costa explained that although the article envisioned the British workers as "privileged" in comparison to the slaves, as it ignored the more egregious punishments of British labourers including transportation or hanging, this article and others certainly raised voices surrounding issues of labour and slavery and could not help but be at least partially heard on the other side of the Atlantic. In Britain, abolitionists tended to be absorbed within specific organizations, whether it was a religious group or as a Member of Parliament.⁷² In the narratives of the Demerara Rebellion (for example, the slave Daniel's reading of the Governor's correspondence), slaves were very much aware of talk about themselves in Britain, even if somewhat imperfectly. The influence of preachers like Smith and conversations among the

⁷⁰ *Guiana Chronicle*, October 27, 1824, as quoted in da Costa, 276.

⁷¹ *Christian Observer*, March, 1824, 160-161, as quoted in da Costa, 282.

⁷² *Ibid*, 12-18.

British, as well as the reports of literate slaves who were exposed to the printed reports all helped provide slaves with an awareness of matters within Britain which affected them in the Caribbean.

Gelien Matthews, contrasting earlier slave rebellions with those of Bussa and Demerara, referred to the élite slaves of the emancipation era as a “later generation of rebels” who were able to use the public discussion of rights in an attempt to gain the same rights and fair treatment as free labourers.⁷³ She saw slaves as being cognizant of the wider world and its discourse, reflecting evidence from this thesis, by adding that “colonists refused to believe that the rebels were responsible for such a sophisticated strategy.”⁷⁴ She noted that the rebels had a plan of action, were attempting to face the Governor with their grievances, and refused to work until their grievances were addressed.⁷⁵ While Matthews used some of the language of labour movements, she placed these concepts within the framework of the promotion of abolitionist ideals. In this, she somewhat reflected Genovese as he described the actions of the Demerara slaves as “attempt[ing] to prevail by nonviolent tactics suggestive of a general strike,” but in its failure and bloody reprisals “strengthened the resolve of the emancipationist party to be done with the tyrannical regime in the colonies.”⁷⁶

It is quite possible that, for potential rebels, there was more than one idea at work during the lead-up to and implementation of the Demerara Rebellion. Following a rebellion in Virginia in 1831 attributed to Nat Turner, various historians saw “radically different interpretative frameworks.”⁷⁷ In the Introduction to *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, editor

⁷³ Matthews, 43-44.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 45.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 44-45.

⁷⁶ Genovese, 35.

⁷⁷ Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dal/detail.action?docID=281182>, 14-15, 12.

Kenneth Greenberg wrote: “The community was diverse and could think for themselves. Those who joined the rebellion frequently did so for their own reasons.”⁷⁸ According to Patrick Breen, in a contribution to *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion*, some of Turner’s allies joined because of their religious beliefs, but others simply wished to break free of slavery; still others were inspired by the Declaration of Independence.⁷⁹ In the trials and convictions following slave uprisings, it was not unusual that hasty judgements made by white officials and planters alike saw slave assertiveness as being only one thing: open rebellion. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion* also contains an observation from James Sidbury that trial transcripts of Nat Turner’s followers did not refer to their leader’s biblical influences because as they were being tried for murder or as accessories to murder, there was “little reason for the courts to delve into alleged rebels’ motives for joining and even less reason for court clerks to record those reasons ...”⁸⁰ It is therefore also highly unlikely that the inflamed Demerara authorities would have noted whether the slaves had risen for better conditions or simply against their masters, especially as it hardly mattered at the time that the slaves had not (except, it appears, accidentally) bodily harmed the whites.

The consistency which appears in slave rebellion narratives, particularly those which occurred within the emancipation era in the Caribbean, may be due to a number of factors. While both whites and slaves would have been aware of the successful rebellion in Haiti/St. Domingue, and it could have provided inspiration for potential rebels in other colonies, it also sparked fear among whites that the same scenario could play out in their own colony, even though specific circumstances differed. This, in turn, would be reflected in whites’ beliefs in

⁷⁸ Ibid, 14-15.

⁷⁹ Patrick H. Breen, “A Prophet in His Own Land: Support for Nat Turner and His Rebellion within Southampton’s Black Community,” in *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion*, Greenberg, ed.: 105-118, 115.

⁸⁰ James Sidbury, “Reading, Revelation and Rebellion: The Textual Communities of Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner,” in *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion*, Greenberg, ed.: 119-131, 126.

what rebel slaves intended, and coerced testimony from slaves would then reflect these deeply held fears and suspicions.

As indicated by the flag used during Bussa's Rebellion, some Caribbean slaves may have believed that a rebellion would result in a sovereign state as it had in Haiti. Other evidence indicates that, dependant on the circumstances of individual colonies, other slaves rebelled with the intention of achieving amelioration of the impact of the labour demands and abysmal material realities in their extremely difficult lives. Historians such as Genovese and Craton, drawing Marxist theories of worker protest, have considered this possibility as a reflection of changing attitudes regarding fairer treatment toward all classes. The slaves embraced this. More modern historians such as Matthews have broadened the scope of possible motivation for slaves, noting that white prejudices tended to downplay the possibilities of more nuanced or moderated goals and demands than an outright takeover among slaves.

Accepted narratives of slave rebellions may have veered from the facts. This could be the result of an impulse to demonstrate the need for excessive force from local militia and regular troops, a way of expressing the solidarity among a colony's slaves, or as demonstrated here, a lack of attention to the details in primary documentation. Although the Demerara Rebellion was significant among slave uprisings for a number of reasons and there were a large number of slaves involved, a close analysis of the sources indicates that the number of slaves actively involved was closer to the numbers suggested by Governor Murray's despatches, Bryant's 1824 published narrative, and Cheveley's journal than it was to the amplified numbers that have since been given by historians.

CHAPTER 6:

Conclusion

By the time of the Rebellion, Demerara had been engaged in one form of turmoil or another for decades. The country that governed it had frequently changed, most often between the Dutch and the English, and planters grappled with a shifting economy and post-Enlightenment society.¹ The combination of English Common Law and Dutch tradition frequently made governing the colony a confusing and tumultuous business, and attempts to adapt to changing times made for a contentious society.² Economically, the entire Caribbean was in flux, after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, which had been key to the survival of the sugar colonies. As well as the usual fear experienced by white planters who were vastly outnumbered by the enslaved, the combination of abolition and wildly fluctuating sugar prices meant that sugar planters were almost constantly concerned about their future business.³ In this atmosphere of tension and paranoia, commonly held ideas of white owners about the rebellious impulses of slaves influenced the way in which planters and officials interpreted unrest. The unquestioned veracity of sources for the Demerara Rebellion and their interpretation by earlier historians has resulted in an erroneous idea of the size and scope of the Rebellion, as well as an understatement of slaves' complex understandings of their situation.

The question of what exactly the rebel slaves hoped to accomplish beyond immediate amelioration or freedom will have to remain unanswered due to the lack of any surviving firsthand testimony from the enslaved, the usual problem with slavery studies. In considering

¹ Da Costa, 28-29.

² Lee, 11-23, 12.

³ Higman, 63.

possible options it is useful to bear in mind a reference by Sharples to the importance of “frames of reference ... originating elsewhere in the Atlantic world” which could guide the thought processes of whites toward the slaves’ intentions.⁴ In this respect, Sharples refers to questions asked of slaves by white masters which related to their view of circumstances shaped through “guiding concepts,” which were then considered by slaves through what they knew of their masters and their own experiences. Expanding outward into other slave societies may be helpful, but it is important to bear in mind that the realities of slave conspiracies have been filtered through white interpretations.

In attempting to define the sort of rebellious action taken by the Demerara slaves, Michael Nicholls’ definition of “conspiracy” provides some insight. He remarked that whenever two or more people, slaves or otherwise, agreed to an unlawful act, they had been a party to a conspiracy.⁵ The larger the number of people who agree to a work stoppage, the more effective an action will be. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (“OED”) definition of “rebellion” comes from Middle English and describes it as “an act of armed resistance to an established government or leader.”⁶ As the incident in question is generally known as the “Demerara Rebellion,” and Demerara at the time was technically under British Common Law, it makes sense to ascertain what defined “rebellion” under British law at the time. A legal dictionary from 1820 offers a contemporary definition of “rebellion”:

Among the Romans, was where [sic] those who had been formerly overcome in battle, and yielded to their subjection, made a second resistance: but with us it is generally used for the taking up of arms traitorously against the King whether by natural subjects, or others when once subdued; and the word Rebel is sometimes applied to him who wilfully breaks a Law: so to [sic] a villain disobeying his lord.

⁴ Sharples, 815.

⁵ Nicholls, 9.

⁶ Oxford English Dictionary, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/rebellion>.

There is a difference between enemies and rebels: enemies are those who are out of the King's allegiance; therefore subjects of the King, either in open war, or rebellion, are not the King's enemies, but traitors. Thus, *David Prince of Wales*, who levied war against *Edw. I*, because he was within the allegiance of the King, had sentence pronounced against him as a traitor and rebel.⁷

Within Demerara, the slaves believed that they had allegiance to the King, they were certainly "subdued," and may have been considered subjects. The question then becomes whether they were wilfully breaking a law of the King's. The slaves were defying the Governor, but there might be a question of whether they were going against the King. The existence of orders from Britain has been proven and the slaves believed that the King had sent orders which would help them. Although the slaves had taken up arms, they were not offering bodily harm to whites if they did not resist. They were unlikely to have thought of themselves as traitorous toward the King, although the *OED* definition notes resistance to a government or leader. There was a conspiracy in that two or more had been planning an act, but whether this was an unlawful act depends on whether the slaves were expected to have allegiance to the Governor as the King's representative if they believed Murray had refused to carry out the King's orders. A question remains whether or not the slaves were beholden to a law of Demerara that would supersede an order from England. It seems, therefore, that to consider the incident in Demerara a "rebellion" technically depends upon whether or not the slaves were held to be fighting against the government. This way of defining the activity according to strictly legal terms seems rather too dogmatic; "rebellion" seems to be an applicable descriptor.

Eugene Genovese's views on the incident's connections to an emerging democracy seem to have some merit in the slaves' demands for better working conditions and time off, as well as

⁷ Thomas Edlyne Tomlins, *The Law Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (London: Payne and Foss, 1820) *sub verbo* "rebellion."

in planters' attitudes toward Smith. Smith's working-class origins affected his status within Demerara planter society. Even within trial testimony, the missionary was made out to be boorish and of a lower order, almost on a level with the slaves in the planters' view.⁸ It seems very likely that some of the planters, if they made the connection between labouring classes and slaves, would view a labour-related protest as a great upset to society, perhaps almost on an equal footing with a true rebellion. The documented history of some of the key white players connected with the outcome of the Rebellion indicate this fear and loathing of a more equitable society. In Demerara, as with other areas of the Caribbean, slaves were aware of the talk in England and would be on the lookout for anything which might confirm improvements to their state. This was indeed what eventually happened with the missive from England which one of the slaves apparently read and gossiped about. The link to a growing movement in Britain toward greater fairness for the lower labouring classes, slave amelioration, emancipation, and Protestant groups is given extensive consideration by Emilia da Costa and other historians referencing the Rebellion.⁹

How the assertion that "all" the slaves present on the East Coast rebelled became perceived knowledge is not clear if one relies on original documents. While there is a vague reference in a letter written by John Smith that all the slaves were in open rebellion, this was written when he was sequestered at *Le Resouvenir* and must have been meant as a manner of speech or based on a rumour. Any such intimation from slaves under questioning is untrustworthy, as likely being the product of coercion. Almost one-half of the slave population was female, yet there is no record of female participants, except for one woman, Susanna, who

⁸ Murray, *Despatch*, 11 (7 in original).

⁹ See da Costa, "A True Lover of Man" in *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 125-168.

stood out as an instigator, although there was a report of a group of women beating a white man with bamboo sticks. There were also some slaves who helped defend their masters' property, released them from the stocks, and refused to join the rebels, although undoubtedly others were compelled to go along with them. From the information available as to which plantations had slaves involved in the uprising, the number of slaves residing on these plantations, and likely percentages of slaves physically able to rebel, I have calculated that it is plausible that from 3,472 to 4,166 slaves were active in the Rebellion.

The report that all of the East Coast slaves had been involved in the Rebellion and that this number was anywhere from 9,000 to 30,000 is puzzling and provides an unanswered but important question: What did this rebellion mean at the time and what has it come to mean over two hundred years later? The disturbance in Demerara reflected increasingly urgent voices of missionaries and abolitionists and the slaves were aware of them. It is apparent that planters were in tenuous circumstances in maintaining their way of life, they were aware of how others saw them, and they were tense to the point of paranoia about the hold they had over their slaves. The authorities in Demerara, who were planters as well as representatives of law and order and which included Governor Murray himself, were in the unenviable position of trying to carry out orders from England that did not serve to make them more secure in carrying on the lifestyle to which they were accustomed. Historians will likely never know for certain what Murray thought he was doing by refusing to release the Crown's orders which virtually everyone, white and black, knew meant something toward improving slaves' lives. According to da Costa, Murray

had already been “admonished” by the British government several times and there were “serious accusations against Murray’s administration and casting doubt upon his character.”¹⁰

The accusations of mismanagement and character flaws levelled at Murray and McTurk, and the relentless hounding of John Smith by McTurk and others while Murray seemed to be in thrall to the more powerful planters, suggest that it would have benefitted the white planters and authorities to depict the Rebellion as being as immense as possible. Portraying the military and civilian militia as having had no recourse except to react as they did in shooting and hanging between one and two hundred slaves, and of causing Smith’s death in jail could have helped excuse or explain their behaviour to their contemporaries.¹¹ Bryant’s version in particular dwells on terrified planters and their families while the military and citizen militia rode to save them.¹² Yet Bryant gives numerous descriptions of rebels stating that they did not want to kill the whites, nor cause them any real bodily harm, but put them into the stocks to avoid their escaping to Georgetown before the rebels could petition the Governor.¹³ In some cases the slaves on certain plantations helped defend their masters, or released them as soon as the rebels left.¹⁴ Even the woman, Susanna, apart from egging on the accused leaders, does not seem to have played a part in picking up arms. Bryant described large groups of insurgents; however, it is evident from the earlier description of movements of the rebels and troops that he wrote to convey excitement and admiration toward the Governor and his men.¹⁵

¹⁰ Da Costa, 26.

¹¹ According to Craton, the total number of slaves dead was about 250. He claims that three whites lost their lives, while other sources indicate two. *Craton, Testing the Chains*, 288.

¹² See, for example, Bryant, 7-9, 16-18.

¹³ See, for example, *ibid*, 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 10-11.

¹⁵ See, for example, *ibid*, 5.

It appears that despite various historians referring to the relevance of Demerara's rebellion in studies of slave uprisings, careful consideration was not given to the numbers of slaves likely to or capable of being involved. Lack of provision of precise sources has created difficulties in understanding how estimates have been arrived at. Although Bryant's publication is often noted by historians, there are indications that his list of the plantations which housed rebels was not carefully consulted or consideration given to the meaning of "all" the slaves. The result seems to be a sizeable misinterpretation of the number of slaves who rebelled. It also appears that inherent in this vision of an entire population of slaves rising at once is the overarching idea of a bid for immediate freedom. Seeing an entire population as one unit banded together diminishes individual characteristics, beliefs, and endeavours. Quamina and Jack, who were only two examples of Demerara slaves, displayed very different approaches to the potential of an uprising. White chroniclers did not consider that slaves were capable of sophisticated reasoning or nuanced approaches, and historians have missed out on the likelihood of dialogue among the slaves of ways to improve their conditions by exploiting opportunities presented to them.

While the Demerara Rebellion was undoubtedly of considerable size and not to be mistaken for an insubstantial uprising, its significance was in its complexity. Although, arguably, all rebellions are likely complex if looked at closely enough, the point is that the Demerara Rebellion's complexity has been overlooked. A closer study of primary sources reveals that while freedom was one agenda, when asked, the first answer to what the slaves wanted was two or three days a week and/or their "rights." Matthews' astute observation that slaves were aware of the wider world and that "colonists refused to believe that the rebels were

responsible for such a sophisticated strategy” appears to be not taken enough into account.¹⁶ As with any group of people, not all thought along the same lines, and where interests met they may have acted, but there was more than one answer when asked what they were hoping to achieve.

In recent years historians have begun to re-examine sources in the pursuit of a deeper and more perceptive truth about slave rebellions. Nicholls, Sharples, and Johnson have all questioned the accepted narrative for various incidents and found that a great deal was originally crafted by white scholars in an atmosphere of racism and lack of understanding of slaves’ experiences. Not only were confessions and testimony from slaves taken at face value without regard to probable coercion, but a white understanding of a situation was sometimes at odds with a black understanding; as Edgerton stated: “Magistrates turned English ears to African voices, but heard them imperfectly.”¹⁷ Beyond the misapprehension of slave testimony, the effect of white paranoia and expectations of what a slave rebellion or slave leader should look like was likely to have greatly affected the way in which rebellions or conspiracies were reported.

It is quite possible that for different slaves, there were various ideologies at work. It is possible, even without candid representations from slaves, to find clues in a close examination of documents in instances like the Demerara Rebellion where there is some record of first-hand conversations with or between slaves; however, this must be treated with care as a clue only and not a definite statement. As well as uncovering information directly relating to the size and reason for the Rebellion, re-examining the documentation from Demerara also indicates that many commentators held a concept of an entire large community united in a common goal, but the reality was much more complex and nuanced. While reference was made by rebel slaves to

¹⁶ Matthews, 45.

¹⁷ Sharples, 811.

having their freedom, others referred to time off for tending their provision grounds, their marketing, their spiritual lives, and their families. Browne has elaborated on the theme of slaves taking advantage of legal recourse through Berbice's slave laws as method of survival and improvement on conditions. The importance of the "paper" from England to the slaves in Demerara shows their willingness to use pressure on authorities who were not complying with orders from England, rather than overturn the colony.

Within the Demerara documents, particularly in Smith's *Journal*, are examples of daily proceedings among slaves and planters. This includes a window on some intimate details of slaves' lives as they talked over their troubles with their pastor. These encounters reflect Brown's observances of Berbician slaves' endeavours to work within the constraints imposed upon them while trying to improve their own situation and that of their families. While slaves in Berbice took planters, slaves and freedmen before a magistrate, Demerara slaves sought advice from Smith, appealed to masters, and finally forcibly held whites at their estates while attempting to petition the Governor in an effort toward legal recourse for improvements in their daily life and work. Browne noted that despite the prevalence of magistrates' not upholding their complaints, slaves in Berbice continued to make attempts to rectify wrongs done to them. He explained their persistence by noting that by making formal complaints, slaves reminded others that there was a governmental body who could overturn a masters' decision and that "even across the Atlantic" people were noticing what was happening, what he termed the "radical potential of amelioration."¹⁸ Evidence from Demerara, although pertaining to pre-amelioration laws like those in late-1820s and early 1930s Berbice, indicates that slaves were able to exploit

¹⁸ Brown, 67.

the system they were trapped within and use regulations as potential for improvement rather than putting their lives and those of their families in more jeopardy by staging a rebellion.

What is known about Quamina, combined with the way in which whites envisioned rebel leaders, raises a question to which an answer will likely never be known. While Quamina was certainly influential and respected, had he actually “grasped every opportunity” as Matthews described in order to plan an uprising? As was evident in Chapter One, he approached the one white man whom he may have trusted to any extent to verify rumours of emancipation or amelioration, yet this may have been primarily because his son, Jack, was deeply implicated in plans for an uprising. We are left questioning whether Quamina was actually involved as a leader or if he wanted to gain as much reliable information as possible in order to decide whether Jack should have his support or, conversely, his advice to extricate himself. It seems entirely possible that Quamina was swept into the situation and, realizing that to the authorities his role was a foregone conclusion, he refused to be captured, tortured, and humiliated, instead dying with his self-respect intact.

Jack of *Success*, also known as Jack Gladstone, was very different than his father, Quamina, who was “a man of reason,” while Jack was a “man of passion.”¹⁹ This becomes evident in reading primary sources dealing with the activities of the two slaves, including Smith’s *Journal* and the trial evidence. Jack made a compelling figure. He was a skilled cooper, described as handsome and clever, in the words of the day, he was “well made.” Jack was also seen as being a great deal of trouble, as one slave described, a “wild fellow,” and another who referred to “that lying Jack.”²⁰ It was Jack who was accused of beginning to spread word among

¹⁹ Da Costa, 182.

²⁰ Murray, *Despatch No. 249*, Court Martial Proceedings, The National Archives, CO 111_42: Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice, Vol. 4, 24 (33 in original); *Further Papers, With Minutes of Trials*, 32.

slaves in the community that a paper dealing with the slaves' welfare had come to the Governor. A slave named Tully testified that Jack said that he would take his freedom by force, although this needs to be treated with as much suspicion as any likely coerced slave testimony.²¹

Quamina and Jack are examples of slaves with different understandings and agendas during uprisings in the Emancipation Era. While both fit the character of men who stood out from the crowd as possible leaders, they also very possibly exemplify differences in ideas of how betterment for the enslaved could be achieved. Jack was known as being unsettled and on the lookout for action, while his father was calm and deep-thinking. White authorities and later historians may have lumped the two together under the title of "leaders" or "possible leaders," but it is also quite feasible to think of their roles in very different ways. Quamina, if he was indeed a leader, with his carefully considered deliberation would be more likely to see the possibility of success if he were to suggest a protest movement in favour of better conditions, being closer to the orders outlined in the missive from Britain. Both men had potential as leaders, but the predictable white ideas of what slave leadership looked like may have shaped opinions toward them.

A perception that a slave uprising meant only one possible outcome seems to reflect the mistaken belief that all slaves in a group were of the same mind and not that individuals might have layered or nuanced ways of thinking through a particular situation when it came to effecting change. Within the assumption by whites that the only outcome of a slave victory would be the inversion of society wherein the slaves became masters and the masters became slaves lay their greatest fear: slaves would take white men's place along with all rights, privileges, and

²¹ *Further Papers, With Minutes of Trials*, 21.

possessions. As the likely result of white interrogators imposing their own fears on accused slaves, confessions of planned armed takeovers, including a “replacement” of white authority with black sometimes occurred, including in the aftermath of the Demerara Rebellion.

Judging from the evidence, many who testified, whether white planter or slave, could not be trusted. Slave prisoners are widely acknowledged to have been coerced, and the slaves Paris, Sandy, Bristol, and Telemachus recanted before being executed.²² Coercion can take different forms: from torture, to protecting one’s family, to the potential for avoiding punishment or gaining much-needed reward. A coerced testimony from a slave may be reflective of white interrogators’ own expectations and fears, and therefore useless as a statement upon which to base evidence, yet it may tell historians something about the planters and other officials. An understanding of witnesses’ personal characteristics and relationships as reflected by documentation made prior to the incident in question can also be useful in assessing reliability or vested interests. Taking statements made at trial at face value can produce a very different effect than the original exchange, as evidenced by the McTurk/Smith spat which McTurk described as being a violent attack.

During debates in the House of Commons in 1824 those in favour of amelioration and/or abolition heaped condemnation on Murray, McTurk, and various burgher captains and military officers. Relying on this, there is good reason to suggest that the size of the Rebellion might have been deliberately inflated, yet there is no real evidence for this. It appears instead that the idea of all the slaves rebelling and the number reaching up to 30,000, and more commonly 10,000-12,000, simply may have happened over time with retellings of the story. What seems

²² Declaration of Demerara jailer, reported in a letter to the LMS from Wray, as cited in Da Costa, 242.

certain, having some scant record of slaves' voices through Bryant, Murray, and others, is that at least some of the slaves realized that freedom at the moment was not within reach, but with the Governor holding ameliorative measures against orders from Britain, it might be possible to claim some time and space for themselves as their "rights" and that through their own agency they might improve their lot.

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