MAKING FOOT-SOLDIERS OF EMPIRE:
ORDINARY WHITES AND THE RISE OF THE PLANTATION
SYSTEM IN BRITISH AMERICA

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Daniel Defoe never set foot in the Americas but he was a prescient observer of American developments, especially about the fast developing plantation societies of the American South and the British West Indies around the turn of the eighteenth century. His most famous novel, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), is a foundational text about European imperialism and race relations in the Americas. *Moll Flanders* (1722) a picaresque novel where the heroine gains redemption for a wicked life in the form of marriage to a wealthy Virginia planter, is also revealing about America. His less celebrated novel, *Colonel Jack* (1722), is especially interesting as a guide to important transitions in plantation societies in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. *Colonel Jack* deals with the adventures of an English thief who finds himself stolen and taken to the Chesapeake in the early years of the eighteenth century where the hero served as a servant, was promoted to be an overseer of slaves and eventually found fame and fortune in armed service.\(^1\) One way of reading *Colonel Jack* is to see it as a commentary on slave management practices, especially about the difficulty of forcing ethnically alien (to Englishmen, at least) African enslaved men to do what those men did not want to do.\(^2\)

Defoe’s hero was present, fictively at least, at a major transformation in American life. This transformation involved two interrelated developments, only the first of which concerns me here. Both developments occurred at a particularly difficult period in British American history. Historians have long recognised first that the decades either side of the eighteenth century were calamitous ones in American history and also that these were decades in which some of the most important institutions of the next two centuries evolved.

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\(^2\) For a penetrating use of *Colonel Jack* as the origin of the motif of the grateful slave, see George Boulukos, *The Grateful Slave: The Emergence of Race in Eighteenth Century British and American Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 75-94. Boulukos provides a useful publishing history of the novel.
For people living through the years between the Glorious Revolution and the 1720s, America seemed to have lost its way. In retrospect, however, we can see this period as ushering in a new period of sustained prosperity. It initiated both a new ruling elite far richer than that had preceded them in American history and whose wealth was derived from successful exploitation of slave labour. These were the owners of a new economic unit in British American history, the large integrated plantation, containing hundreds of slaves working in dreadful conditions to produce staples for an overseas market.3

What was especially important about these developments is that the developing planter elite found an effective means whereby slavery could be made to work for their benefit. As Lorena Walsh conclusively proves in her rich, deeply researched and entirely persuasive encyclopaedic account of elite planter’s business practice in the pre-revolutionary Chesapeake, most Chesapeake planters were economically rational actors who maximised labour, one of the two scarcest resources in the colonies (capital being the other) in the colonies. As she argues, the Atlantic slave trade and (after the second generation of African workers) natural increase made labour problems disappear. At the same time slave owners learned how to exploit slaves more and more efficiently through changing patterns of work organisation. The result was a rapid transition to slave labour as the primary form of labour organisation in the Chesapeake and elsewhere. The main shift occurred in the 1680s and 1690s when, as in Jamaica, white indentured servants began to disappear from the

workforce. The profitability of using slaves to grow staple crops led to a dramatic change in scale on plantations. After 1700 in the Chesapeake, some of the richest planters had acquired slave forces of over 100 slaves, a size of slave force never approached before 1700. In Jamaica at the same time, the largest slave forces exceeded 200 slaves. The result was the amassing of considerable wealth, the economic basis for the almost unchallenged cultural and political dominance that large planters exerted for decades. As Walsh notes, “from the perspective of the chaotic last third of the eighteenth century, they would look back nostalgically to this time as a sort of untroubled Golden Age, a characterisation that most historians of the Golden Age have subsequently also embraced.” These planters grew rich on the back of slaves, whom they treated with a degree of violence never seen before or since in the sorry annals of American slavery. Eventually profits became so considerable from slave produced labour that planters were able to abandon the relentless entrepreneurialism that had marked their seventeenth century ancestors, retreating from commercial life, turning towards self-conscious agrarianism that justified participation in the public realm. In short, efficient exploitation of ever larger cohorts of slaves allowed planters to turn from “provincial frontier barons into close replicas of the eighteenth century British gentry.”

It was on the large plantations of the American South and even more so the British West Indies where slavery was most efficient. The fortunate planters who oversaw these developments became immensely powerful. Their slaves, on the other hand, were forced to

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4 The standard explanation for the move from servants to slaves is Russell R. Menard, “From Servants to Slaves: The Transformation of the Chesapeake Labor System,” Southern Studies, 16 (1977), 355-390. An important new interpretation, which argues for slavery being introduced deliberately by wealthy men who preferred slaves to servants, is John C. Coombs, “Building the Machine: The Development of Slavery and Slave Society in Early Colonial Virginia,” (unpublished PhD diss. College of William and Mary, 2004). Menard has changed his mind appreciably since 1977, mostly due to his ongoing studies on Barbados. As well as providing the best contemporary introduction to the introduction of slavery in Barbados in the 1640s, he, with Dimitri Debe, has stressed the importance of migrant Barbadian ‘plungers’ among the most significant Maryland planters adopting slavery before 1660. Menard, Sweet Negotiations and Dimetri Debe and Menard, ‘The Transition to Slavery in Maryland: A Note on the Barbados Connection,’ Slavery & Abolition, 32 (2011), 129-41.

live through the period in American history where people of American descent experienced their greatest degradations. The advent of the large plantation was crucial in both creating wealthy planters and also traumatised, degraded enslaved people. It was a brutal, violent process that turned southern and island colonies into slave societies where, as Frank Tannenbaum famously put it, slavery affected every aspect of life. As Tannenbaum argued, “Nothing escaped [from slavery]; nothing and no one.”

The key to the emergence of the large integrated plantation was solving the problem of how to control large numbers of brutalised and traumatised enslaved people who had little reason to follow owners’ orders. The plot of Colonel Jack helps us to understand how planters used violence and terror to accomplish this problem of slave discipline. But before turning to an analysis of Colonel Jack, let’s look at the particular historical problem that Colonel Jack can help us elucidate. The problem, simply stated, is that the emergence of the large integrated plantation, where hundreds of slaves laboured and where all the processes of staple production were carried out in a single enterprise, occurred later than one would have expected, given the widespread establishment of slavery everywhere in English America by the mid-seventeenth century.

What needs to be explained in looking at the transformations in British America in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries is why the movement to a plantation model based on large-scale African chattel slavery presided over by a small and wealthy planter class took so long to occur in societies such as Jamaica and Virginia that were ideally suited to become plantation societies. Why did it take nearly 100 years for Virginia to become a plantation society on the Barbadian model? Why did Jamaica, an island larger than Barbados, populated to a large extent by people with experience in Barbados, with land well suited for the production of sugar, and with a populace anxious to make quick and large fortunes, not

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become a proper plantation society for over thirty years? The obvious counterfactual to what happened in the American South and the British West Indies in the last quarter of the seventeenth century is that canny colonists, aware of what had happened in Barbados, moved as soon as they could to the fully fledged plantation system. The shift should have occurred in the Chesapeake in the 1660s, in the Leeward Islands and Jamaica in the 1670s, and in South Carolina in the 1680s, rather than in the 1690s and 1700s in all of these areas. In each of these societies, the preconditions for plantation development were in place decades before the actual shift occurred. I argue, contrary to scholars who see the move to a plantation system as being “revolutionary” in its speed and implications, that the shift to plantation agriculture in British America was surprisingly slow, except in Barbados. Even there, as Menard and McCusker show, the shift to sugar in the 1640s and 1650s was a gradual process that merely sped up and intensified a process already underway in the island. It was not a “revolution,” as can be seen in examining the shift to plantation agriculture in Barbados in respect to capital, labour, and land.\(^8\)

Walsh illustrates the situation very well. Building especially on the unpublished work of John Coombs concerning the introduction of slavery into the mid-seventeenth Chesapeake but also on the revised thoughts of Russell Menard, joined by Dmitri Debe, on the importance of people with Barbados experience in shaping decision making processes in other plantation colonies in North America and the Caribbean, Walsh revises the longstanding apercu of Winthrop D. Jordan from the introduction of slavery being an ‘unthinking’ decisions to being one that is very much a deliberate choice. As early as the 1630s and 1640s the wealthiest Virginia planters chose to buy slaves when they could from Dutch traders. They ensured their investment in slavery by making private decisions that established African slavery as a different form of bondage than had been customary in the colony and confirmed those private

\(^8\) McCusker and Menard, “Sugar Industry,”.
decisions in colonial legislation. As she states, “many of the conditions that came to define African slavery – lifelong service, heritability, descent through the mother, public support for policing private property, relegation of women to heavy field labor and restrictions on men’s access to weapons – had already been established in practice, if not in law, within the first three decades after Africans arrived in the region.” By the 1650s blacks were a common presence in the larger work forces, working alongside indentured servants and comprising, in York County, as much as 15 percent of the population. The wealthiest planters moved early and decisively into buying slaves, leaving them well placed by the 1660s to move beyond small scale slavery into developing a model of economic organisation which by that period had been proven in Barbados to be a highly profitable form of economic organisation. Arguments that wealthy planters only turned to slaves because they suitable supplies of servants had disappeared are no longer persuasive. Rich Virginians, just like Barbadians and Jamaicans, had not only switched to slaves early. They had also the first choice of bound labourers offered for sale (many of whom came from the West Indies rather than Africa), good credit with European merchants, and excellent information about the productivity of African slaves in the West Indies. Nevertheless, their switch to slavery was not accompanied by a sudden move to the large integrated plantation. This move did not take place, either in the Chesapeake or elsewhere in British America, for nearly another generation, until the 1690s.9

By this date, in Virginia as in the British West Indies, large planters had chosen slavery irrevocably. But it was only after the 1690s that Virginians really turned decisively to

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the large scale importation of slaves and to dramatically increasing the size of both the average and the largest slave forces. By the first decade of the eighteenth century some of the richest Virginian planters had slave forces of over 100, in work forces containing virtually no white servants, toiling, as they had done in Barbados for twenty years, in regimented gangs. The richest Jamaicans began in the same period to own slave forces of more than 200 slaves. In both colonies the proportion of the population that was black increased exponentially, from under 7 percent in 1680 in Virginia to 25 percent in 1720 and from under 50 percent before 1680 to well over 90 percent in Jamaica. At exactly the same time, a stronger distinction between white people and black people began to emerge as a growing racial consciousness became more entrenched. By the second quarter of the eighteenth century, everywhere in plantation British America the racial transformation was close to complete. Very few white servants remained and most that did remain were assigned to supervisory positions on plantations. Elite planters could be increasingly confident of enlisting the help of non-slaveholding whites, now given the ideological comfort of being “white” in societies that valorised whiteness and condemned blackness in supporting the slave regime.\textsuperscript{10}

Why was the move to the large integrated plantation so slow? Why did it take a generation in Jamaica and nearly two generations in Virginia after the widespread establishment of African chattel labour as the principal form of labour organisation before we see an appreciable number of planters owning large slave forces (over 50 in the Chesapeake and over 100 in Jamaica)? One answer is farm building: it took a long time everywhere except Barbados to transform semi-tropical and tropical landscapes into plantation grounds.\textsuperscript{11} Barbados was exceptional because the geography of the island meant that most of the hard work clearing and cultivating land had been done before sugar production started in earnest. We shouldn’t underestimate, nevertheless, the ease by which Barbados was made suitable for

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid, 204-5.
\textsuperscript{11} An exemplary work is Lois Green Carr, Russell R. Menard and Lorena S. Walsh, \textit{Robert Cole’s World}
tropical agriculture. When the first settlers arrived in the 1620s and 1630s, the land was covered by rain forest and it took a great deal of work for settlers to cut down the massive trees, many over a hundred feet tall, which populated Barbados. Richard Ligon’s map of around 1650 shows that the only thoroughly cleared area was along the leeward coast with the interior largely uncleared and unworked. Yet it was easier to develop land in Barbados than in mountainous Jamaica or in Virginia outside of the immediate tidewater.

Barbados, on the other hand, was as settled as southern England by the 1670s. Governor Atkins declared that “there was not a foot of land in Barbados that is not employed even to the very seaside” and visitors thought that it looked like one continuous green garden. By contrast, Jamaica in this period looked barely inhabited. Most of the population was concentrated in a small area of the southeast around the towns of Port Royal and St Jago de la Vega. The mountainous interior was occupied, to the extent that it was occupied at all, by runaway slaves who were forming formidable Maroon societies. We get some idea of the difficulty of the process of development in Francis Price’s establishment of the Worthy Park plantation in the central parish of St Thomas in the Vale in Jamaica. When Price died in 1689 he was a relatively poor man. His land was only partly cleared and it was devoted mainly to provision crops and pasture grass rather than sugar. Price’s farm was a modest pioneer property, such as might have been found in the backwoods of Virginia or in the Carolinas. It was only under the management of Price’s son Charles that Worthy Park was transformed into a large plantation with hundreds of slaves and significant amounts of cane land.

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13 Governor Atkins to .
But the main reason why Jamaica and Virginia were so slow in developing the large integrated plantation was that the logistics of managing large numbers of slaves constrained planters from increasing their slave forces past a certain size. Managing a gang of fifty traumatised, hostile and potentially violent African slaves was a different proposition from controlling a smaller group of enslaved people. Maintaining discipline over labour forces of hundreds of slaves, as became increasingly the case in the British West Indies by the second decade of the eighteenth century, was more difficult still. That the most problematic concern for large planters was keeping slaves in check leaps out from the admittedly limited literature on master-slave relations in the early days of the large integrated plantation. My contention is that the shift from small scale to large scale slave plantations only came about when planters solved the problem of disciplining enslaved people. They solved this problem, in my opinion, through the application of terror.\(^\text{15}\) To make slaves terrified, they needed people able and willing to inflict terror. These people inflicting terror were ordinary white men, acting as overseers and book-keepers on slave plantations, subalterns, if you will, using the proper definition of subaltern as a junior officer or a non-commissioned officer.\(^\text{16}\)

Much of my evidence is scanty and inconclusive because the records on these matters are silent or opaque about the crucial matters that led to the fundamental changes outlined above. I think, however, there is sufficient evidence about how the large integrated plantation emerged to make the following argument.\(^\text{17}\) My argument is that this new subaltern class emerged in the last decade of the seventeenth century in places like Virginia and Jamaica as a


\(^{17}\) The evidential justification for the statements made in this piece are contained within a longer work, tentatively entitled “American Transformations: The Development of Plantation Societies and Planter Elites in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1660-1750.”
result of three simultaneous developments: the decline in opportunities outside the plantation economy for ordinary white men; the increased presence in plantation America of men who had considerable experience of being brutalised and meting out brutality as soldiers and non-commissioned officers in the large armies of the Nine Years’ War (1688-1697) and the War of Spanish Succession (1700-1713) or as sailors in the increasingly numerous English or British slave ships plying Atlantic waters; and the increasingly racialised disposition of labour on large plantations, where white men were promoted out of indentured servitude into managerial positions as slave drivers and overseers while the vast majority of black slaves were consigned to difficult work as field hands. What planters needed were tough men prepared to do whatever it took to control enslaved men and women working in dreadful work and living environments. They found such tough men from the ranks of poorer whites, men accustomed to violence and men who were prepared to put up with the hardships of supervising recalcitrant slaves and growing perishable crops in return for good wages and the rewards of white privilege in societies turning from class conflicted societies into ones with a significant racial caste dimension.¹⁸

In making this argument, the plot of Defoe’s *Colonel Jack* serves a useful purpose. The hero of *Colonel Jack* is born a gentleman but through a variety of circumstances becomes a pick-pocket in London, where he flourishes as an adept criminal before being convicted, sentenced to death and then relieved by transportation to Virginia. The dating of the novel is imprecise but the internal logic of the novel suggests that Colonel Jack was born in the 1680s and came to the Chesapeake sometime around 1710. By this date, the plantation system dominant in the eighteenth century, where the majority of labour was African and where most slaves lived on large estates containing 50 or more slaves, was becoming established. In the novel, Jack was kidnapped and sent to Virginia. He was sold to a rich

planter and consigned to hard labour and rough treatment on a tobacco plantation containing
50 servants and 200 slaves. Before long, however, he had been promoted to be an overseer
and had been given a horse “to ride up and down the Plantation to see the Servants and the
Negroes” and a Horse-whip “to correct and lash the Slaves or Servants when they proved
negligent or quarrelsome, or, in Short, were guilty of any offense.”

Readings of Colonel Jack usually focus on Jack’s pursuit of gentility. It is also seen
as the first instance in English literature of the use of what George Boulukos identifies as the
trope of the grateful slave. Boulukos also sees Colonel Jack as an important marker in a
developing ideology of “whiteness.” It was written at two moments of transition in eighteenth
century North American slavery: the beginnings of what Philip Morgan discerns as a shift
from patriarchalism to paternalism and the start of more explicitly racist discourses valorising
whiteness. It can also be read, however, as a guide into the problem of slave management
on large plantations at a time when that issue was becoming a problem for planters seeking
answers as to how to control large numbers of recalcitrant and potentially violent male
Africans.

Defoe confines his discussion of punishment almost entirely to the slave rather than to
the servant population. He mentions servants mainly to highlight the proto-sentimentalist
theme whereby the ex-servant, Jack, finds it difficult to overcome the natural empathy he has
with other people in bondage, given that he “was but Yesterday a Servant or Slave like them
and under the authority of the same Lash.” But only slaves face punishment in Colonel Jack. By the time Defoe was writing, in the second decade of the eighteenth century, white
indentured servitude, while not yet anachronism, was fading in importance. No plantation
in the Chesapeake would have had a mixture of 50 servants and 200 slaves as did the

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19 Defoe, Colonel Jacque.
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21 Boulukos, The Grateful Slave; Philip D. Morgan, Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-
22 Defoe, Colonel Jacque.
plantation Jack was notionally on – a more likely breakdown would have been 5 or 10 servants and 200 slaves.\textsuperscript{23} Moreover, the modal experience for whites on the plantation may have mirrored Jack’s. Jack was a servant indentured for his passage across the Atlantic who very soon after arrival was moved out of indentured servitude into waged labour as a plantation operative. Jack’s career pattern – servitude to overseership to independent landowner and slave owner – was not uncommon. The situation was more complicated in the Chesapeake, where large importations of convicts meant that there were a sizeable body of coerced white labourers in plantation work forces until after mid-century, than elsewhere.\textsuperscript{24} But by the early eighteenth century the numbers of white indentured servants recorded in inventories plummeted from levels recorded in the mid to late seventeenth century. The explanation is that white men were promoted out of servitude into overseerships. The labour force became almost entirely black while whites became part of the managerial class essential to control that labour force.\textsuperscript{25}

The decline in indentured servitude was apparent everywhere in the last decades of the seventeenth century and the first third of the eighteenth century. The supply of indentured servants into Virginia contracted dramatically between 1680 and 1730 as English emigration to the New World, especially to the Chesapeake which, unlike the West Indies, was not the site of any significant fighting, came to a halt during the many years of war between 1688 and 1713.\textsuperscript{26} Moreover, what emigrants there were stopped being indentured servants sent to labour, like Jacques, in the field alongside blacks. The figures on indentured servants available from Jamaican inventories are revealing about how rapidly slave labour displaced

\textsuperscript{25} Walsh, \textit{Motives of Honor}, 205; Amussen, \textit{Caribbean Exchanges}, 129-44
white indentured servitude in the decades immediately before and after 1700. Indentured servitude was never a major part of the Jamaican labour system: slavery was established soon after settlement in the 1650s and as early as the 1670s slaves comprised over 90 percent of the workforce. Nevertheless, indentured servants did come to Jamaica and worked alongside servants in the field. Between 1674 and 1680, 96 indentured servants worked alongside 1,832 slaves in lists of labourers recorded in Jamaican inventories, making up 5 percent of coerced labourers. In the next decade, indentured servitude was still important, with 215 indentured servants noted in inventories alongside 4,836 slaves, comprising 4.3 percent of the workforce. In the next decade, however, indentured servant numbers plummeted to 28 and in the decade following indentured servants virtually disappeared from labour forces. Between 1701 and 1710, only 12 men and 2 women were listed as servants in inventories, making up just 0.3 percent of the unfree population.

How whites moved out of servitude into managerialism is one theme in *Colonel Jack*. But a more powerful theme is that the only way to control slaves is to treat them with a firmness that amounted to brutality. Defoe devotes no attention to the ways in which his hero devised stratagems for more effective planting. He moves directly from recounting how Jack was promoted overseer to a long discussion of the how overseers kept their slave charges in check. At first, Jack was apprehensive about whipping slaves because he had a misplaced empathy with people who had been the day before his fellow labourers. His empathy was misplaced because it led to increased insubordination “insomuch, that the Negroes perceiv’d it, and I had soon so much Contempt upon my Authority, that we were all in disorder.” One slave he lashed even laughed at his softness, having “the Impudence to say behind my Back, that is he had the Whipping of me, he would shew me better how to whip a Negroe.”

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27 Inventories, IB/1/11/3/1-6, Jamaican Archives, Spanishtown, Jamaica.
28 Defoe, *Colonel Jacque*.
It led Jack to reflect on whether kindness would work in making slaves obedient. He concluded that kindness alone would not work as the “Cruelty in whipping the Negroe Slaves was not so much owing to the Tyranny, Passion, and Cruelty of the English, as had been reported; the English not being accounted to be of a cruel disposition; and really are not so.” In fact “Negroes … cannot be managed by kindness, and Courtesy; but must be rul’d with a Rod of Iron, beaten with Scorpions, as the Scripture calls it; and must be used as they do use them, or they would rise and murder all their Masters, which their Numbers consider’d, would not be hard for them to do, if they had Arms and Ammunition suitable to the Rage and Cruelty of their Nature.”

The implications of this argument – that terror alone was the only way in which slaves could be controlled – was tempered in Defoe’s telling by a sub-discourse whereby the threat of terror against miscreants was accompanied by the promise of mercy. As Boulukos suggests, “Defoe narrates what could be called the invention of slave-owner paternalism, the moment in which a policy of unashamed cruelty is abandoned from the suspicion that gentler ways might produce more efficacious results.” Through the exercise of mercy by all-powerful but merciful disciplinarians, gratitude towards masters could be inculcated in people whose “brutality and obstinate Temper” made them naturally ungrateful.

One can’t help but think that what Defoe is doing here is shrinking from the implications of his previous argument, that Africans could only be controlled by a “rod of iron.” He did so mainly to dispel suspicions that the English were cruel tyrants. The abrupt and disconcerting shift halfway through his treatment of African character from seeing African “temper” as arising from environment to arguing that their “temper” could be changed through good treatment may be, as Boulukos suggests, indicative of a characteristic eighteenth century failure to take the difference between culture and essence seriously. It is

29 Ibid.
30 Boulukos, Grateful Slave, 82.
just as likely to be a narrative strategy that shrinks from the implications inherent in an argument that actively presupposes the English to be as naturally cruel as Africans are naturally barbarous.31

Defoe acknowledges that his ingenious argument for slave-owner paternalism is unrealistic and naïve. He admits that real planters, especially in societies such as Jamaica and Barbados, where slave revolts were frequent and where whites were vastly outnumbered by blacks, would have considered it a hopeless fairy tale to contemplate a slave management strategy designed to make slaves feel grateful for what they received from planters. Jack himself only adopts the idea of inculcating slaves’ gratitude through terror after transforming himself from an apathetic whipper of negroes into a man, who was willing have a slave “scourg’d … to Death,” rather than being slaves’ “jest [rather] than their Terror,” Jack concedes also that his new policy would have no chance of succeeding in the West Indies because there “the Overseers really know such thing as mercy.” Here Defoe follows the many statements of Jamaican writers that the essence of slavery was terror, from Edmond Hickeringill writing in 1661 before the large plantation system had taken root, who was the first writer to insist that the only way to preserve white safety was through the application of the harshest measures against Africans, to James Knight and Charles Leslie writing in the 1730s and 1740s when life for black Jamaicans was at its nadir. Knight argued that extreme violence was necessary against a people who were so “sullen, deceitful, [with a] Refractory Temper.” Leslie was certain that “No country excels [Jamaica] in a barbarous Treatment of Slaves, or in the cruel Methods they put them to death.” Leslie insisted, however, that such harsh usage was acceptable due to the nature of African character. Slavery in Jamaica was

31 For an argument that suggests that early modern Englishmen were acutely conscious that as people living in cold climates without the temperance that living in a temperate climate brought accusations of brutality could stick, see Mary Floyd-Wilson, English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The argument that the English were naturally cruel continued to be axiomatic for many Europeans into the mid-eighteenth century. See the discussion of Lesuire in David Bell, The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).
brutal “given how impossible it were to live amongst such Numbers of Slaves, without observing their Conduct with the greatest Niceness and punishing their Faults with the utmost Severity.”

By the time that *Colonel Jack* was written, the path for success for young European migrants with little money and few connections was through the plantation economy. It was not always so. Until the last decades of the seventeenth century, ordinary white men had a variety of alternatives to the plantation economy in which to achieve the vaunted aims of independence and patriarchal authority over dependents. As Peter Thompson argues, “In post-Restoration Virginia, as rates of mortality declined and the number of women in the colony increased, little commonwealths, or family units of production, became more common than they had been at any time previously, and Virginia’s taxpayers were increasingly likely to be married. The very factors that restricted access to marriage in the third generation of settlement, chief among them a growing scarcity of land, only heightened the potential political power of the poor to middling labourer who had managed to acquire a household.”

Thompson points to an important possible alternative history to the rise of the planter class and the large plantation. That alternative is that Jamaica, Barbados and Carolina could have become societies where slaves and indentured servants worked together in small gangs owned by independent householders who worked alongside their bonded labour, producing goods mainly for domestic rather than foreign consumption. A large literature, of course, exists on this topic, headed by Edmund Morgan’s classic work on seventeenth century Virginia. Morgan fingers Bacon’s Rebellion as a class conflict in which the vision held by small landowners in Virginia lost out to the vision of the big men in the Chesapeake. The rise to power of Virginia’s planter elite was traced in a famous article by Bernard Bailyn in 1959,

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32 Edmond Hickeringill; [Charles Leslie], *A New History of Jamaica* (Edinburgh, n.d ca. 1740), 38, 336-8; James Knight, 79-87;

In essence, the explanation for the slowness of the switch from small-scale slave holdings to large-scale slave holdings and to the large integrated labour system based on ganged labour revolves around the question of how ordinary white people, increasingly excluded from the ranks of larger planters, were to be included both within the plantation economy and within the developing political economies of the plantation South and the British West Indies. The question that the winners in this often brutal class conflict needed to think about is what should be done with the white people who had lost out in the transformations effected by the switch to slavery in the second half of the seventeenth century? At bottom, this turned out to be a political problem because, unlike slaves, ordinary white men and women, from servants to small freeholders, both had a choice over the directions of their life and also had a say over the extent to which they engaged or did not engage with the burgeoning plantation economy. This political problem concerns one of the great conundrums of American, and indeed British, history: why did the losers in a bitterly contested class conflict between rich and poor in which the rich advanced a radically new and different vision of the ideal social order than that desired by the poor not only accept their loss but become effectively co-opted by the elite into a political relationship characterised by deferential behaviour from the poor towards the rich. The issues at stake in this transformation were considerable, as Edmond Morgan vividly outlined in his classic work on colonial Virginia written a generation ago and as was also addressed, in different ways, by J.H. Plumb and E.P. Thompson in influential interpretations of early eighteenth century British society at around the same time that Morgan was writing. There is little doubt about

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34 See the works cited in n.3. The work of Russell R. Menard on seventeenth century transitions in the Chesapeake, Barbados and South Carolina is especially illuminating on the manifold transitions that occurred in several plantation-oriented regions around this period. Menard, Migrants, Servants and Slaves: Unfree Labor in Colonial America (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).
who won – the wealthy slaveholding elites of the Chesapeake and the British West Indies – but what still needs to be explained is why poor whites, the principal losers in this class conflict except for Africans and Native Americans, adapted themselves so readily to a new environment in which their vision of the ideal social order had been so comprehensively defeated.35

Walsh casts considerable light upon this process of socio-economic and political change. It is a crucial question in the history of early eighteenth century plantation societies because the success by which planter elites managed this process helped determine the contours of what Walsh calls, with considerable irony given the violence that was an intrinsic part of this period, the ‘Golden Age’ of Chesapeake agriculture. The majority opinion among the few historians who study events in plantation British America in the decades either side of 1700 is that the transformations of this period led to growing colonial prosperity, harmonious politics and a social system in which Africans were relentlessly degraded and Native Americans excluded from social and political life without either Africans or Native Americans being able to make effective resistance against their precarious position. It was the best of time for the privileged slaveowning elite. It was also at least a tolerable period for white men further down the social scale. The switch to large plantations made plantation British America flourishing places for all white people. By the 1730s, rising prices for tobacco, productivity improvements in a host of areas, the increasing efficiency of the transatlantic slave trade in those areas, such as the British West Indies and South Carolina,

which relied upon the slave trade to maintain slave numbers and the achievement of natural black population increase in the Chesapeake brought prosperity to all whites, not just the rich. Middling planters were able to acquire slaves and find niches for themselves as producers of goods that served the plantation system. The port towns of Kingston, Charleston and Bridgetown grew rapidly, despite poor demographic conditions, allowing whites multiple opportunities to make money from commercial endeavours. Small planters were able to modestly improve their living standards by combining self-sufficient agriculture with working for wages at harvest and by producing goods for local markets. The landless, except for the desperately poor, could make a decent living by serving as plantation operatives. All these groups did so under the agency of large planters and merchants who enjoyed remarkable political legitimacy in an age where qualified deference was the norm and where the imperial government was largely indifferent to what was happening in the colonies. The establishment of large-scale plantation agriculture was crucial to the maintenance of gentry dominance. As Walsh notes, “between 1730 and the end of the Seven Years’ War, a vigorous economic recovery, accompanied by growing political and cultural maturity ... sustained a Golden Age” in plantation British America “with all free residents, whatever their level of wealth, shar[ing] at least to some extent in the general imperial prosperity.”

That the move to large scale plantations marked an era of unprecedented prosperity for white people was clearer after the event than during the process of transformation. Ordinary whites did not think that the plantation colonies offered much opportunity in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: migration declined rapidly as potential migrant found other outlets for their energies in an improving metropolitan economy or were forced into military service. What population increase there was resulted from natural increase rather

Migrants had good reason not to move to the New World because their prospects were not great in the 1680s and 1690s. Gloria Main concludes that while the bottom 90 percent of the population was slightly better off in 1720 than they had been in 1620, the vast majority of wealth gains went to rich planters. The gap between rich and poor became more evident, however, as the economies of scale associated with the transition to the large integrated plantation led to a dramatic increase in the wealth of the greatest planters. The result was that by the early 1700s most ordinary Englishmen no longer believed that the plantation colonies of the New World afforded them economic opportunities. More people went to the British West Indies than to the Chesapeake but migration levels sunk well below mid-seventeenth century peaks. White people voted with their feet. It became harder and harder to get rich in the colonies unless you already had a very large head start. Initial start-up costs were high and profits from tobacco and sugar until at least the 1730s were low. In addition, especially on small farms where managerial control was exercised at the personal level, aspirant planters found that enslaved workers strongly resisted any attempts by supervisors to increase their workload. Good overseers were hard to find and were directed by wealthy planters towards their estates, leaving smaller planters with the dregs. Without large resources or strong managerial skills, small planters extracted only average returns while incurring large debts.

38 Main, Tobacco Colony, 60-62.

The transformations that led to the rise of the large plantation and the rule of gentry elites need not have happened in the way it did. In the second half of the late seventeenth century, in the age of the small planter, white men showed great reluctance to commit themselves fully to the imperatives of the plantation economy as envisioned by large planters, even though they were active and eager participants in the developing culture of African chattel slavery. The ability of ordinary white men to achieve a comfortable competency slowed the speed of the switch to full scale plantation agriculture. Let’s see how this worked in Jamaica, the island where the switch should have been quickest and most complete.

Jamaica had almost everything necessary to become a plantation society on the Barbadian model by the early 1670s. What it lacked, however, was the means by which its increasingly large slave population could be marshalled into gangs producing sugar. What was truly revolutionary about the plantation system was not that it was based upon the labour of captive Africans - unfree labour was customary in all forms of agriculture throughout the seventeenth century - but was the methods by which these slaves were worked. As Gabriel Debien commented, “The making of sugar, even the simplest raw sugar, requires, if undertaken on any scale, the rotation of numerous disciplined work teams, a regime of punishing toil, closely supervised by day and by night. This was a new type of work, an element of social revolution.”

Putting slaves into gangs of labourers was the crucial step whereby the economies of scale implicit in the integrated plantation could be harnessed. Gang labour with its lock-step discipline and liberal use of the whip to force slaves to work as hard as possible was the key to the productivity advantages that the integrated plantation had over the dispersed system of mixed farming common before the advent of the plantation system. Once the gang system emerged, first in Barbados, probably twenty years or so after the introduction of slavery in

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the 1640s, its productivity advantages over other ways of organising sugar production were so great that it led to a thorough reorganisation of the sugar industry, with major consequences, especially for Africans, for all involved. Its efficacy was recognised early on. The first description we have of gang labour comes in a series of instructions given by leading Barbadian sugar planter Henry Drax to his overseer in a book first published in the mid-eighteenth century that was probably written in around 1670. Drax believed that the “best way to prevent Idleness is constantly to Gang all the Negroes in the Plantations in the Time of Planting.” he advised his overseer to put “All the Men Negroes into two gangs, the ablest and best by themselves for Holeing and the stronger Work, and the more ordinary Negroes in a Gang for Dunging.” Women and “lesser Negroes” were also to be divided into two gangs.  

But there was nothing intrinsically complicated about putting slaves to work in this way. Any careful observer of how sugar, tobacco and rice was produced would see that the best way to make such commodities would be by breaking down the various activities into distinct steps and having each of those steps done by controlled gangs of labourers. What was tricky was forcing bonded labourers to do this arduous and boring kind of work, work that was outside of the experience of most workers in Africa, Europe or America before the late seventeenth century. Workers hated gang labour and would not undertake it freely. As a Barbadian slave was quoted saying bitterly, “the devil was in the Englishman that he makes everything work; he makes the Negro work, he makes the horse work, the ass work, the wood work, the water work and the wind work.”

Planters could not persuade or force white servants to work in gangs, mainly because they were constrained by common understandings of the limitations of what fellow Christians could do to each other. They accepted that there were certain levels of freedom that could not

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42 Cited in Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves.*
be taken away from Europeans. They were far less constrained in how they could treat black slaves. There was also a significant gender dimension in the move to harsher and more coercive work regimes. As Jennifer Morgan argues, white planters were hesitant about using white women as field labourers. They drew on traditions in Europe where women’s work was distinguished sharply from that of male workers. Determining what Barbadian planters thought about having white bound labour is complex. Hilary Beckles insists that many planters, especially those with small slave forces and those who worked alongside their labour force preferred white servants to black slaves. But there is also evidence that larger planters, the men orchestrating the shift to the large integrated plantation, were ambivalent at best about keeping white servants. Henry Drax advised his manager that “I shall Not leave you many White Servants the fewer the better were itt not Incumbent duty on all to keepe the Number the Act of militia requiers for the Countreys Service.” Why he was so opposed to white servants is hard to know but he did find white servants troublesome on account of their propensity for “drunknese,” which he thought “the vice the Whits are much addicted to.”

To make large gangs of slaves work, planters needed men willing to apply the physical force needed to make slaves work as required.

This task was not for the thin-skinned, as any discussion of what overseers had to do to slaves makes clear. Ira Berlin summarises well what happened in the Chesapeake as the plantation regime took hold. What he says applies even more forcefully to Jamaica, Barbados and South Carolina. As Berlin notes, the plantation regime needed raw power to sustain it and planters mobilized the apparatus of coercion in the service of this new regime. Slavery had always been brutal in British America but the level of violence exercised against Africans dramatically increased as the size of slave labour forces increased. After 1700, Berlin

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44 Morgan, *Laboring Women*.
45 Beckles, *White Servitude and Black Slavery*.
46 Thompson, “Henry Drax’s Instructions,”.
explains, “Chesapeake slaves faced the pillory, whipping post, and gallows far more frequently and in far larger numbers than before.” Moreover, the punishments meted out to slaves were not only cruel, they were increasingly ingenious. Punishments were invented intended to humiliate and demoralise, such as when William Byrd II forced a bedwetting slave to drink a “pint of piss.” In addition, there were grotesque mutilations for criminal infractions and gruesome tortures leading to executions for those slaves caught after daring to rebel.  

Of course, slave drivers did some of the hard work of disciplining slaves. Slave drivers were specially chosen for their “activeness, diligence and honesty.” They occupied a curious position in the slave hierarchy. On the one hand, they were the leaders of slave communities. On the other hand, however, they were the agents of planters and overseers in terrorising slaves. They customarily carried out whippings. Planters, too, were involved in disciplining slaves, though usually at a distance. The state-sponsored tortures and executions of slaves were under their control. But, as is made clear in Colonel Jack and in plantation management manuals from the late seventeenth century onwards, the key people involved in carrying out planter wishes and in ensuring that slave drivers did not shirk their duty, especially in punishing slaves, were white servants: men who were not indentured servants so much as wage labourers, often working for generous salaries. These white men did not work alongside slaves, as was the practice for indentured servants working on small, dispersed estates, but spent their time as overseers managing, controlling, cajoling and punishing slaves.

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47 Berlin, Many Thousands Gone, 115-6.
48 The precise status of these men is difficult to assess as so little information exists about them, about how they became overseers and bookkeepers, and about The best analysis of this intermediate group of whites in plantation society is B.W. Higman, Plantation Jamaica, 1750-1850: Capital and Control in a Colonial Economy (Kingston: University Press of the West Indies, 2005). Higman, however, is concerned with the highest level of white employees (attorneys) in the concluding period of Jamaican slavery. His attorneys are often indistinguishable from planters. An important book about the white subalterns who kept the antebellum United States plantation system going is William Kauffman Scarborough, The Overseer: Plantation Management in the Old South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966).
Without such middle-managers, the work of the plantation would not proceed, because, as Henry Drax admitted in one of the earliest slave management manuals, dating from Barbados in the 1670s, “Many Negroes will be apt to Lurk and Meech from their Work, without great Care be taken to prevent it.” What white overseers had to do was to make “every Negro doth his Part, according to his ability, the weak hands must not be pressed, nor the Strong suffered to shrink from their Work.” To achieve this aim required constant monitoring of slave activities: “your under-Overseer must constantly have a List of the gang under his particular Care, that he may be able to give a Particular Account of everyone, whether Sick or how employed.” Punishment needed to be immediate and exemplary: “If att any time you take Notice of a fault that you design to punish lett itt bee Emediately Executed Espetially on Negroes: Many of them being of the houmer for awoydng punishments when threatened.” 49

The questions we need to ask are, first, why did whites become willing to work in the plantation economy in the last decades of the seventeenth century when they were not willing to do so previously and, second, to what extent did whites have the skills and the fortitude necessary to control slaves through brute force. The answers to these questions are necessarily founded upon supposition, because we have virtually no direct information about these vitally important members of the white community in the period of transition to a plantation system. But if we look at Jamaica’s transformation into a plantation society with many large sugar estates and numerous large slave forces, we can make some guess as to how the process worked.

John Taylor, an English visitor who left a vivid account of his time in Jamaica in 1687-88, is a good guide to how white servants came to become overseers and also to the brutality that they were expected to mete out to slaves. He noted how unpleasant the life of a

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49 Thompson, “Henry Drax’s Instructions,”.
white servant was, claiming that “the wealthy planter” was “verey severe to his English servants, for alltho’ they are not putt to worke att the hough as the Negroa slaves are, yet they are kept verey hard to their labour att felling of timber, hewing staves for casks, sugar boyling and other labours, soe that they are little better than slaves.” Indeed, in some respects they were worse off than slaves, because if a servant was a pretty female domestic servant “to be sure hir master cloathes her well and hir mistris bestows many curses on hir and blowes to the bargain.” Servants were cheaper and more dispensable than slaves, meaning that “there is not half that car taken of `em as over their Negros, and when dead noe more ceremony at their funerale than if they were to berey a dogg.”

Servants therefore had every reason to “repent their rash adventures in comming from England, to be slaves in America.” They did have an opportunity to escape their travails by becoming overseers, just as Defoe’s Jack did. In the last page of his book, Taylor argued that servants who accepted their lot as servants and did not increase their time of servitude by running away would be able to “advance their fortune, for those manservants which come hither come commonly (if of a cappacity) employed in shops and to be supervisors of storehouses and in plantations.” Earlier on, he noted that “Negroa slaves” were “committed to the government of the overseer, who has other whit servants under him, as drivers to keep them to their labour, soe that one whit servant commands some twenty of ‘em, under the overseers.” The implication is clear: these servants had moved out of their previous employ into managerial positions. Taylor does not explicitly describe how slaves worked, whether in gangs or at task work, but they way he describes their work patterns suggests working in gangs: “all hands turn outt to labour both men and women together, where they all work at

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50 David Buisseret, ed. *Jamaica in 1687* (Kingston: University Press of the West Indies, 2006),
the hough etc., and are followed on by their drivers, which if they loiter sone quickens their pace with the whip.”

How slaves worked was less important to Taylor than how they were controlled. He recognised that positive incentives played a part in encouraging slaves to work, stating that each male slave was given a wife “without which they will not be contented, or worke.” But treating slaves well by providing them with more than just “a linnen arscloot” for clothing, for example, was pointless because “they differ only from bruite beast only by their shape and speech.” They were “ignorant pore souls” who responded only to violence or to threats of violence. He described how if they “have committed robbery, prove sullen, refuse to work or the like” they were whipped by the overseer “till their back are covered with blood; then he rubbs them with salt brine, and soe forces them to their work again.” Further infractions led to overseers whipping them and rubbing their raw backs with molasses “for the wasps, merrywings and other insects to torment.” Englishmen might think such treatment “hard” but Africans needed it “for if you should be kinder to ‘em they would soner cutt your throat than obay you, for they are soe stubborn that with all this whiping, missey, or torment, they shall seldom be seen to shead a tear, but rather at first laugh, and then afterwards stand scilent.”

It was only on large plantations that the hierarchy of white overseers and drivers described above was needed. Their work was unpleasant and the possibility that slaves would rise up and kill them, as occurred in the several slave revolts on large plantations in the 1670s and 1680s was always strong. The relatively low number of large plantations extant before 1700 everywhere except Barbados suggests that planters found it difficult to get sufficient white labourers to expand their operations as they may have wanted. But things changed rapidly between the 1690s and the 1720s. Those whites who survived epidemic fever and who found work on large plantations, nevertheless, may have been ideally qualified for

51 ibid
52 Ibid, 266-70.
implementing the radical novelties involved in maintaining plantation discipline. My suspicion is that a large percentage of men who worked on plantations in the last decade of the seventeenth century and the first decades of the eighteenth century were hardened to the rigours of plantation life by their previous experience in England’s armies and in the Atlantic slave trade. Men who had served in the Anglo-French wars of 1688-97 and 1702-13 or who had sailed on Atlantic slave ships were not strangers to the brutality that marked the transition to large scale slavery. Indeed, when we speculate about where men in this period learned how to treat Africans with the harshness typical of plantation discipline and where they learned how to withstand the fear and terror of slave revolt that accompanied white life in the late seventeenth century Caribbean it is to the army and the slave ship that we should turn. As Robin Blackburn has perceptively remarked, these were the only institutions in early modern life whose labour organisation and harsh discipline mirrored those evident in the integrated large plantation.53

The late seventeenth century was a period of almost constant warfare between the English and the French. It was also a period when the numbers of men involved in the Atlantic slave trade dramatically increased. I think that there is a link between the rise of the large integrated plantation and what Michael Roberts, as modified by Geoffrey Parker, famously called the “military revolution” of the late seventeenth century.54 Jamaica, as Stephen Saunders Webb has illustrated, was a highly militarised society, a garrison government in which military men, whether governors or planters, had great influence. Social hierarchy was largely organised around military assumptions, with the leading men officers in the militia. Every man of any distinction went by a military title – councillors were

53 Stephanie Smallwood; Christopher, Slave Ship Sailors; Rediker, Slave Ship Alexander X. Byrd; Blackburn, Making of New World Slavery.
colonels and colonels were councillors. Such titles were more than just honorifics. The militia, despite the constant murmurings of governors that it lacked the discipline of the regular army, was generally an effective institution. It mustered regularly and was deployed frequently both internally, against slave rebels, and externally, against the French. Some indication of how useful a military body the militia was came in 1694 when two thousand Jamaican militia men repelled a large French expeditionary force that had invaded and laid waste to the eastern parishes of the south coast.\textsuperscript{55}

It was not just officers and governors who were militarily minded. Ordinary white men were required to serve in the militia, were instructed to exercise regularly and had to keep at least a gun, if not a horse, for their military service. Webb insists that the military abilities of these ordinary men were surprisingly good. They were good shots and good at drill. One likely reason why the Jamaican militia was effective is that many militia men would have had previous military experience. The late seventeenth century saw one of the greatest army mobilizations in English history. It also saw the creation of the English standing army. The size of that army was around 80,000 strong in the wars against the French between 1688 and 1713. That meant that around one man in seven was called to service in the army. It was these men, of course, who were disproportionately represented among late seventeenth century European migrants to Jamaica.\textsuperscript{56}

The new armies of the late seventeenth century were not only larger than armies that had operated in Europe previously; they were also different in kind. Standing armies looked back to imperial Rome with their emphasis on uniform training, discipline and permanence. There were two features of the standing army that make it comparable to the plantation system. Like slaves, soldiers were subjected to relentless, monotonous work patterns. What soldiers did most of the time that they were not fighting was to drill. Soldiers marched up and


\textsuperscript{56} John Childs, \textit{The British Army of William III} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 103.
down relentlessly. William McNeill has noted the similarities of drilling to dance. It was also similar to the type of work organisation characteristic of slaves working in gangs. Also soldiers, like slaves, were subject to fierce discipline. The army’s disciplinary code was harsh and became noticeably harsher in the last two decades of the seventeenth century. Military punishments were tough and unyielding. Flogging was introduced in William III’s reign as the principal mode of correction, making army discipline similar to that customary in slavery. But perhaps because soldiers were expendable in ways that slaves, as commodities, were not, floggings could be considerably more severe in the army than on the plantation. A common soldier would constantly see men being flogged, often flogged to death or at least to permanent disablement. Like planters, officers were able to impose their own punishments on the rank and file and although in theory these punishments did not in theory amount to loss of life or limb, except in cases of mutiny, sedition or desertion, in practice officers could punish men as ferociously as they liked. Another feature of the late seventeenth century standing army that bears comparison with the plantation system is that soldiers were generally recruited by officers who took responsibility for their wages and who in turn were able to think of the soldiers they had recruited as “property.” Although soldiers tended to be paid in wages, there was something about their status that was also akin to enslavement. In short, men who had served in the standing armies of William III and Anne would not have found plantation discipline especially unusual or even especially harsh.

Sailors who had sailed in the Atlantic slave trade were even less likely to be alarmed by how roughly slaves were treated on plantations. A recent spate of publications about the Atlantic slave trade and about the role of sailors in that trade has made clear just how vicious conditions were on slave ships and how English sailors controlled slaves using maximum force. The slave ship was both a prison and a place of open warfare between brutal sailors

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and brutalised captives. Manning on slave ships was so high because the possibility of slave rebellion was ever-present. It was not a gentle business. Sailors had almost complete freedom to discipline captives and even though ship captains had a vested interest in seeing as many of their slaves survive the voyage as possible, they had little hesitation in punishing captives extremely harshly, even to the point of death. One need not labour the point about the brutality everywhere present on the slave ship. What is worth emphasising, however, is how important the slave ship was not just in acculturating captives to their new status as commodities but also in acculturating English sailors into working out strategies about to deal with slaves. The harsh discipline of the large integrated plantation echoed the violence endemic on slave ships. The people exercising that violence – white overseers and English sailors – were likely to have been one and the same person.58

If my argument is correct, what conclusions about the transformation of British American society as exemplified by late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Jamaica follow? The most important point would be that Edmund Morgan was right in suggesting that in order to understand the rise of the Chesapeake planter elite from the 1690s and the concomitant rise of the large integrated plantation system we need to follow closely what happened to ordinary white men in plantation societies. I would argue, moreover, that what Morgan saw developing in Virginia replicated what occurred in Barbados in the 1660s and mirrored what was happening simultaneously in Jamaica and the Leeward Islands in the 1690s. Morgan argued that the rise of Virginia’s planter elite only occurred after a bitter class conflict, in which planters won and heads of what Thompson calls “little commonwealths” lost. Small planters may have lost the class battle of Bacon’s Rebellion but they were too essential to the smooth functioning of Virginian society for great planters to ignore them entirely. As Morgan argued for Virginia and is clear for Jamaica, planters had to make an

58 Stephanie Smallwood, Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Christopher, Slave Ship Sailors; Rediker, Slave Ship Alexander X. Byrd.
accommodation with them. Ordinary white men may have found it impossible to achieve
dream of an autonomous independence as small landowners but even the most hardened
class-warrior large planter realised that if some sort of social order protecting their hard-won
privileges was to prevail, white men had to be both accommodated to the interests of large
planters and also they had to be well compensated for agreeing to become plantation
operatives doing the hard work of subduing resentful African slaves.

That compensation took two forms. First, they received high wages for what they did.
By the middle of the eighteenth century, at least in Jamaica, a successful slave overseer could
command his own price. The costs of employing white plantation workers was a substantial
expense on the mid-eighteenth century Jamaican plantation, with overseers getting £100 to
£200 per annum and lesser workers between £25 and £50.\(^{59}\) White plantation workers earned
substantially more than their counterparts in non-plantation agriculture in the American North
and in Britain. Second, as Morgan intuited for Virginia, the shift to a full scale mature
plantation regime was accompanied by a heightened awareness of race. Whites were not only
separated out from blacks economically, with blacks being slaves and workers and whites
being free and masters or managers. There was also a gradual shift towards making race
rather than freedom the principal marker of status. How plantation societies developed
ideologies of “whiteness” and “blackness” is beyond the scope of this essay. It did not work
in quite the ways that Edmund Morgan posited in 1975. But even if Morgan is not entirely
correct about the details of the shifts that he outlines between seventeenth century and
eighteenth century plantation societies, the essential outlines that he traces seem to me to
have still considerable explanatory power, if only for Jamaica rather than Virginia.\(^ {60} \)

Second, while unfortunate for the million and more Africans caught up in the
plantation system, the move to the plantation system was a breathtaking success, at least for

\(^{59}\) Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny and Desire*.

\(^{60}\) Morgan, *American Slavery-American Freedom*. 
those fortunate enough to be the beneficiaries of the process. In the grand sweep of American history, we have to look to the advent of industrialisation in the American North in the first third of the nineteenth century and the second industrialisation of the last third of that same century to witness any event more transformative in American history than the transition to plantation systems in large parts of British America. The principal benefits that the slow move to a mature plantation system brought were prosperity and stability. As Barbara Solow argues, “It was slavery that made the empty lands of the western hemisphere valuable producers of commodities and valuable markets for Europe and North America. What moved in the Atlantic in these centuries was predominantly slaves, the output of slaves, the inputs of slave societies, and the goods and services purchased with the earnings on slave products.”

Stability is a more problematic concept, drawn from J.H. Plumb’s definition of “the acceptance by society of its political institutions, and of the classes of men or officials who controlled them.” Not all versions of eighteenth century politics see rule by an accepted elite as quite as unchallenged from below as proponents of gentry dominance imagine. Nevertheless, the incessant strife of the seventeenth century period of bewildering political experimentation had ended by the beginning of the eighteenth century. In almost every colony genuine ruling elites, separated by wealth, power, style of living and ideology from the rest of the population, had emerged. These elites were able to dominate colonial life pretty much unchallenged until at least the mid-eighteenth century. The rise of colonial elites and their increasing acquisition of power did not necessarily depend upon the establishment of a plantation system – the merchants of New England and the Middle Colonies did so without plantation slaves. But the most cohesive elites were in plantation societies such as Virginia, South Carolina, and Barbados. It was in these societies that “the politics of

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62 Plumb, Growth of English Stability.
harmony” were most apparent, oligarchical rule was most firmly established, deference from poor to rich was most observable and ruling class solidarity most especially pronounced.63

A final conclusion involves the African slaves who were the principal victims of this major transformation in American life. When we talk about how Africans coped and did not cope under the relentless machine that planters built to exploit them in their period of greatest degradation in the early eighteenth century, we note in passing the vicious treatment that they suffered from the white capos who served as the human face of planter oppression. But what white men did to black men and women in order to make these people obey them and conform to their standards of what constituted proper work was not an incidental by-product of the rise of the plantation regime but central to how it came about. If we are to understand why black life was so degraded under that regime, we have to understand the mentality of the white men who beat them, raped them and cowed them into submission. These men were formidable opponents. They did not scare easily; they were merciless and ruthless; and they used their fear of what Africans might do to them if they were not always watchful into a powerful weapon of oppression against Africans themselves. Their attitude to their African charges was similar to how European soldiers in eighteenth century standing armies viewed their enemies: they demonised them. Brutalised themselves by their experiences in war, in the African slave trade and on the plantations of British America, they acted as tyrants towards other brutalised people. The foot-soldiers of empire, they were the glue that held the plantation system together. When slaves resisted their enslavement, as they often did, it was them that they had to get past first. That feat was something slaves never managed to achieve.