Caribbean: “Barbadose'd” - The Transportation of Convicts

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When surgeon Henry Pitman published in 1689 an account of his adventures – his “great sufferings” – in the West Indies, telling a tale of being swept up in the 1685 Monmouth Rebellion, of transportation, of oppression in Barbados, of intrepid escape and capture by pirates, he was confirming an established image of the Caribbean as a place of exile and exploitation: for white people in Britain and Ireland the West Indies already meant a form of “slavery.” Pitman's story was made familiar in the twentieth-century novel *Captain Blood* by Rafael Sabatini and the Hollywood film by Michael Curtiz (starring Errol Flynn). The experiences of most of those transported to the British Caribbean from Britain or Ireland, however, were not so exciting, nor did they have a happy ending in a return home. Vagrants, petty criminals, rebels and, above all, the Irish, had little hope of escape or freedom.

Transportation began under James I (1566-1625, King of England from 1603) as part of a general initiative to relocate the poor, vagrant or criminal to places in the new empire desperate for labour: the 1603 royal decree on vagabondage listed both East and West Indies as probable destinations, as well as Newfoundland and continental Europe. London used transportation from 1618 onwards particularly in disposing of minor offenders and the destitute young in the city institutions such as Bridewell. First Virginia and then Barbados and other Caribbean islands were cited as places to send those who were presented before the courts. Paul Griffiths suggests that, while Virginia was the prime destination of Bridewell’s banished, largely described as rogues or vagrants, some – in the late 1620s and early 1630s – were sent to Barbados, Bermuda and St Christopher’s. The legal basis of these shipments was rather vague: many people “agreed” to go rather than await full trial and sentence, and a kind of blackmail seems to have pervaded the process. Some had a limited time to find a ship to leave London on their own initiative, and could be re-arrested if they did not do so.

More formal, though poorly recorded, were those who were sentenced to transportation after criminal trials. Most of these involved royal pardons from a sentence of death, and this marked the beginning of transportation's formal role in the English judicial process, though the usual destination before the civil wars was Virginia. After the Restoration in 1660, it became more common for judges themselves to reprieve criminals sentenced to death. Mary Carleton, the "German Princess" from Kent, whose reputation lasted more than a century after her execution in 1673, spent at least 2 years in Jamaica after being reprieved from the gallows and transported, but she evaded any "barbarous slavery" on her arrival, and was greeted as a celebrity, according to popular pamphlets written after her death. A letter from Jamaica to her "fellow-sufferers" in Newgate Gaol may be partly authentic, the first by a transported female convict. She escaped on a ship to England, unwisely returned to her old ways, and was soon recognised, arrested, tried as a returned transportee, convicted and hanged. Her varied and exciting life spawned a large number of pamphlet accounts. She must have been one of the few to succeed in returning. Trevor Burnard suggests that large numbers of convicts were joining white servants in Jamaica by the 1680s, making up about a third of white migration. 353 convicts left London and Bristol in 1685 alone (when the annual intake of white migrants was about 1,000), and were only slightly outnumbered by indentured servants. This was probably the peak of convict transportation to the island, as demand for white labour declined steeply in the 1690s, and Jamaica refused to take any more convicts after 1717. More than 1,300 convicts are known to have been shipped to Jamaica alone between 1660 and 1718. This makes the description of Jamaica by Edward Ward (*A Trip to Jamaica*, 1698) as a "receptacle of vagabonds, the Sanctuary of Bankrupts, and a Close-Stool [latrine] for the Purges of our Prisons" a grossly exaggerated picture. No Caribbean island was a penal colony, but they did draw upon many different sources of forced migration.

One major movement of population was the forcible transportation of those characterised by the British state as "rebels" in Britain and Ireland in the civil wars or "risings" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Cromwellian regime used techniques of ethnic cleansing of Catholics in Ireland after 1649, and the policy of transportation was extended to dispose of royalist soldiers of every nationality captured at Dunbar and Worcester, and to remove troublesome captives such as the West Country rebels of 1655 (the Penruddock or Salisbury Rising). This practice was renewed after Monmouth's Rebellion against James II (1633-1701) in 1685, and then implemented after the Jacobite Risings of 1715 and 1745. The start was in Ireland after the massacre at Drogheda in 1649. The 1650s saw thousands expelled from Ireland in English ships, some to serve in continental armies, and others to the Caribbean. All classes of Catholic Irish feared being "barbadosed," either through capture in arms, transplantation or judicial process. The last was a minor aspect, though records are few. There were laws for dealing with rebels, and the 1652 Act for "settling" Ireland in fact allowed the shipment abroad of anyone in the way of the process. "Transplantation" succeeded by using the explicit threat of transportation. The result was that thousands went to the Caribbean, where by the 1660s there said to be 12,000 Irish (compared with 50,000 African slaves). The prospect of alliances between these two oppressed groups was a major fear of the local authorities, as Hilary Beckles has demonstrated.

Narrative accounts of this period are few, and come from a small group of lucky – and literate – individuals. Royalist soldier Heinrich von Uchteritz was one of 1,300 prisoners taken after the battle of Worcester (1651), and transported to Barbados a few months later in 1652, and the only one to have returned, he claimed. He described great plantation owners: his own had 100 "Christians," 100 Africans and 100 "wilde" or Amerindians. He was fed largely on potatoes and cassava, both strange to him, and forced to do the "work usually performed by slaves." Marcellus Rivers and Oxenbridge Foyle were sent from Exeter to Barbados after being accused of involvement in the Penruddock

Rising of 1655. They were not put on trial, and on their return protested in a lengthy petition that they had been transported “uncondemned.” They described Barbados as the “Protestants' Purgatory”: they themselves were “Barbados merchandize,” “brought over in a coffin,” and “sold as beasts” on their arrival by the “men-stealers” or “merchants of Babylon” who had shipped them there. Rivers and Foyle say little about the voyage except that they were kept locked below decks for the entire period until their arrival. Henry Pitman records the death of 9 of the 100 or so who went with him. Conditions from the beginning were harsh and unfamiliar. Rivers and Foyle confirm the poor diet, and report the servants being yoked to ploughs, whipped at their masters' pleasure and living in “sties worse than hogs” (von Uchteritz similarly thought the slave quarters were like dog-kennels). At the time of Monmouth's Rebellion in 1685, the authorities were ordered by James II to intensify the conditions of the transportees. The “convict rebels” had to serve 10 years, and were not to be released before they had done so. They could not marry during that time and, if they attempted to escape, could be whipped and branded on the forehead with the letters “FT” for “fugitive traitor.” Later histories of Barbados would comment exaggeratedly that this law made the condition of the rebels “almost equal to slavery.” Henry Pitman, who records this law which was imposed retrospectively on those who had already arrived, was among the first rebel transportees to go through what became a standard legal process in the subsequent Jacobite rebellions – a form of confession of participation in the rising and official pardon for transportation. In later rebellions captives were required to sign indentures with the ships' captains as well, so that they could be sold into servitude on arrival (to the captains' great profit). John Coad's memoirs were kept secret by his family until the nineteenth century; transported to Jamaica, he seems to have been integrated into a nonconformist community there before his eventual release under William and Mary (who ruled from 1689 to 1702). His voyage, like the others, was an experience of standing-room only below decks with 100 others. 22 died on the way in a prison “of crying and dying,” and there were disease and death among the crew and passengers too. In a storm, the captain was forced to ask the convicts to help save the ship. On arrival, Coad was purchased by co-religionists and was released after about 5 years. These were unusually literate and successful survivors, and provide a contrast with the historical silence in which most transportees to the Caribbean, European or African, endured their experiences.

In the eighteenth century the two Jacobite risings, 1715 and 1745, again provoked the British government into organised shipments of captured enemies to the west, including the islands of the West Indies. Those captured in the defeat of the risings were subject to careful sifting, with some famous names reserved for trial (and execution) along with one in 20 of the “common sort” of rebel, and the rest mostly allocated for transportation. Some were allowed to go into exile. The results were that by the end of 1717, 639 rebel prisoners had been shipped across the Atlantic, the majority of them to North America. 173 were targeted at the Caribbean, though not all survived the imprisonment in England or the voyage over. After the '45, much larger numbers were captured, and it is likely that more than 900 were intended for transportation. Though precise numbers are not available, we know that Liverpool convict shipper Samuel Smith was responsible for taking 453 prisoners by 1748, all but 33 of them to the Caribbean. 128 men are recorded being landed and sold in Barbados. To Smith's annoyance – and financial anxiety, since he only received half the money before the voyage, and half after he had delivered both the prisoners and proof of their delivery to the government – he lost the 150 men on the *Veteran*, which was seized by a French privateer near Antigua. These men escaped servitude in the plantations, some to serve in the French forces in the West Indies, and others to be carried to France and exile. So, at the end of the period of domestic civil wars and rebellions, the West Indies provided the means to the British government of disposing of the enemies of the state.

There were other, apparently threatening, groups who were subjected to transportation. Small numbers of victims of religious persecution in the seventeenth century, under Charles II (1630-85) and James II, were sent to the Caribbean. Quakers – members of the Society of Friends – came under instant pressure the moment that Charles II took the throne in 1660 and in 1664 a new law imposed transportation as a penalty for a third offence of attending an illegal "conventicle" (congregation). By the beginning of 1665 large numbers of Quakers were in jail, and at least 150 had been sentenced to transportation. In Hertfordshire, 8 men had been sentenced, "Innocent People," said one pamphlet, "sentenced for Transportation or Banishment for innocently sitting together in silence (waiting upon the Lord)." As plague hit London in 1665, the sentenced Quakers were concentrated from all over the south of England in its jails, with terrible consequences for one group. Of the 55 loaded onto the *Black Eagle*, nearly half died of plague, and the ship fell into Dutch hands. Ships left with smaller numbers for Nevis and Barbados. The Scottish Covenanters, by resisting the Stuart idea of a national church, were subject to waves of repression in the 1670s and 1680s. Many were sent abroad in 1685 because of their association with Argyll's rebellion (which was to be co-ordinated with Monmouth's). These men and women were hideously mutilated by branding, the men also losing their ears, before transportation. Many went to New Jersey, but some were sent to the Caribbean. Gilbert Milroy settled into a career as an overseer on a plantation before returning to Scotland. He was part of a large group of 190 sent to Jamaica, more than 30 of whom died on the voyage, their sufferings recorded and memorialised by the Covenanter writer Robert Wodrow.

What Simon Newman calls the "brutal white servant regime" in the Caribbean was not as bad as slavery, but laid the foundation for the exploitation of Africans for 200 years. Yet the abolition of slavery in 1833 was not the end of white transportation. In 1838, after a rebellion demanding greater autonomy, 8 French Canadian "patriots" were shipped to Barbados, part of a political policy of intimidation and exile imposed by the governor of Lower Canada, the first Earl of Durham. The Caribbean still remained, for the British authorities, a convenient dumping ground.

Further Reading

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