

Book Review in History

by Emilie Egger, Bennett Parten, and Jacqueline Ly

JAMAICA, THE SEVEN YEARS' WAR, AND TRANSATLANTIC RESISTANCE

Charles F. Walker

Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020. viii + 336 pp. Figures, maps, notes, and index. \$35.00

Reviews in American History 49 (2021) 29-33, © 2021 by Johns Hopkins University Press

In 1760 and 1761, slaves rose up in Jamaica, killing dozens of people, burning estates, and raising questions about the durability of English domination and the institution of slavery on the island. Petrified slaveowners and their dependents feared for their lives and for the demise of the brutal system that enriched them. **Vincent Brown has written an extraordinary history of what came to known as "Tacky's Rebellion," providing a fine-grained account of the conflict, with special attention to geography. But his contributions move far beyond an insightful analysis of the rebellion itself. Brown also establishes a new cartography of slave resistance, revealing the connections between this and other uprisings across the Americas and the Caribbean and their deep roots in Africa. Tacky's Revolt is a tour-de-force that excels on all fronts and offers numerous new lines of inquiry for historians of slavery.**

The uprising began when slaves, most of them West African or "Coramantees," plundered sugar plantations in the eastern part of the island. They moved quickly, recruiting allies and seizing weapons and food. Many of the rebels, including the leader of the first stage of the rebellion, Tacky, had military experience in Africa. English colonial forces employed militias, maroons, and the Army and Navy to counter them. Within a week, a maroon marksman, Lieutenant Davy, had killed Tacky; authorities displayed his head in Spanish Town. Tensions smoldered, however, and in May the uprising resurrected in the west of the island. Slaves took advantage of the dense Hanover Mountains and other forests, descending to ransack estates and then to retreat and regroup, employing classic guerrilla tactics. The war lasted for over a year. At some point in late July or August 1761, militia forces executed rebel leader Wager, also called Apongo. They also killed thousands of rebels. Surrounded, many insurgents took their own lives. The rebellion, at least its first stage, was over. The violence unnerved slaveowners, who understand the fragility of their system of domination in a Caribbean island where slaves constituted the

In this section the author does an excellent job of establishing what the book under review is about. He or she identifies the author and offers a quick description of the book.

Even more important, the author then sets up his or her central contention, which in this case is an explanation of why the book matters. Long-form reviews aren't typically argumentative in the way journal articles often are, but they should still advance a contention or a claim about the book in question.

Transitional terms or phrases such as "But" (used here), "Yet," or "However" are useful tools to help writers move toward a central claim. They can also help readers mark where a summary ends and an argument or an analysis begins.

Book reviews can work in one of two ways. They can be more descriptive in nature, or they can focus on a book's big idea and how it's implications to speak to the wider field as a whole.

Because longer form reviews typically allow the reviewer more space, it's important to situate the book within the field as a whole and reach for the "big picture."

In this particular example, the author does that by saying the book "establishes a new cartography of slave resistance...." Readers from both in and out of the field can read this and immediately get a sense of why the book is important and what its key contribution might be.

majority of the population. Immersed in the Seven Years' War, the English took measures to prevent further unrest, tightening social control in plantations and urban centers and restricting all Blacks' mobility. In addition, they asserted greater control of the management or governance of the island. Jamaica's elite by and large accepted the new arrangement, considering it a necessary concession for the security it offered and going so far as to express their gratitude to King George. Similar measures would prompt quite different reactions in England's North American possessions.

Historians have long understood Tacky's Revolt as a major slave uprising. They recognize its intensity and ferocity, its impact across Jamaica and beyond. Many have seen it as one more battleground of the Seven Years' War (1756–63), a curious side-note to the global struggle between England and France.

Brown provides a vivid account, akin to war correspondence, of the guerrilla warfare: the ambushes, counterattacks, and incessant pursuit for supplies and allies. Yet, this book is much more than microhistory. Brown also reveals how the uprising formed part of a transatlantic world of slave resistance that stretched across the Americas and the Caribbean. The author proposes that four confrontations overlapped and shaped the bloody struggles over slavery in the Atlantic World: wars in Africa where Europeans' search for slaves collided with and redirected prior conflicts and alignments; the incessant conflict between slaves and slaveholders; disputes among Black populations; and the Seven Years' War itself. In order to understand the convergence of these conflagrations and tensions in mid eighteenth-century Jamaica, Brown's analysis encompasses Africa, the Atlantic slave world, Jamaica and the Caribbean, the 1760–61 rebellion itself, and its legacy. That kind of geographic and analytical scope is a tall order, but Brown achieves his objective of plotting out the transatlantic nature of slave revolts, while also presenting a masterful narrative of the uprising itself.

Historians of slavery in the Americas invariably begin their story in Africa. Yet, far too often they provide precursory overviews, more textbook than monograph. Brown uses the uncertainty about Apongo's origin (the few relevant sources alternatively refer to him as a prince, a subject of the inland empire of Dahomey, or most probably from the Gold Coast) to explore the many world of the Gold and Slave Coasts of Western Africa.

These include strong kingdoms such as that of Oyo; more ephemeral slaving states that traded goods and human chattel with Europeans; and stateless people, always in danger of enslavement. In his search for Apongo, Brown foreshadows his argument about the diversity of the Coromantees, a generic term for slaves from the Gold Coast, bringing to light their long experience with war and their internal divisions. Brown also uses Apongo to introduce us to the European forces in Africa: John Cope, an agent of Great Britain's major Gold Coast fort; the Royal

Specificity matters: Here, the writer must recount what other scholars have already argued about Tacky's Revolt in order to demonstrate how Brown is going beyond these conclusions. By identifying the specific arguments others have made, the writer demonstrates that he is a competent judge of Brown's work.

Book reviews also indicate how the book fits into existing scholarship. Reviewers sometimes highlight whole literatures or list specific scholars with whom the text is in conversation.

Here, the author contends that the text under review adds to the history of slavery by making an existing assumption in the field more complex.

Navy Captain Arthur Forrest, Aponte's eventual owner, who renamed him Wager after a warship; and the plantation owner Thomas Thistlewood, who wrote about the uprisings and referred to Apongo in his well-known diaries, an indispensable source on Jamaica and the horrors of plantation society in *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (2004). These chapters bring to life the variety of military traditions forged in Africa that crossed the Atlantic via the slave trade. More than once, Brown reminds us that a rebel slave had been a soldier in Africa. Brown sets the stage for the rebellion with two aptly named chapters: "The Jamaica Garrison" and "Coromantee Territory." Since seizing Jamaica from the Spanish in 1650s, the English "fortified" the island with a military government, an extensive navy presence, and garrisons and forts along the coast. Plantation architecture displayed the owners' wealth and power, but also hinted at their fear of revolt. Maroonage had become such a problem that in 1739 the Jamaican military forces signed a non-aggression pact with major maroon communities, offering them autonomy in return for their agreement to fight against England's enemies, external and internal, often meaning recalcitrant slaves. Tensions simmered in the mid eighteenth century as demand for sugar led to incessant importation of slaves. The Seven Years' War heightened the strategic importance of Jamaica and prompted concern about invasions. The enemy, however, was not external. In 1760, slaves made up more than 90 percent of the Jamaican population. In rich ethnographic sections, Brown explores the different worlds of Jamaican slaves and former slaves, highlighting the possibilities for collaboration but also the deep divisions that hindered solidarity. The uprising began in April 1760, when 100 men rushed Fort Holdane on the north of the island, seizing arms, ammunition, and supplies. They stormed across St. Mary's Parish, attacking sugar estates and recruiting slaves. The British declared martial law. While contrasting the hit-and-run tactics of the rebels and the scorched earth policies of the English, Brown also notes that the adversaries had one thing in common, debilitating internal divisions. Some sources hint that the rebel leaders had a relatively cautious plan that included tempering violence in order to gain allies among the non-slave population, while many followers had more radical intentions, seeking to expel Europeans and to destroy the sugar economy by force. Among the English, plantation owners, imperial authorities (governmental and military), and more common people did not see eye to eye on how to defeat the rebels. These differences bring to mind the Haitian Revolution thirty years later. Brown uses exquisite maps to guide the reader through this initial week of insurgency. While exploring the varying notions of space and warfare managed by the rebels and the oppressors—ideas and tactics marked by traditions and technologies from both Africa and Europe—the author also homes in on the progress of the

rebellion, how it surged forward across estates and was then forced to retreat, responding to the counterattacks by militias and the military.

Just weeks after the demise of the uprising in the northeast, slaves rose up in western Jamaica. The insurgents took advantage of the hills that spread across this part of the island. The English tightened their already-drastic measures against Blacks' freedom of movement yet as Brown shows, **it was counterinsurgency, the "mundane grubby" form of rural fighting, that would ultimately turn the tide after over a year of ambushes and brutal hand-to-hand fighting (p. 185).** The English deployed the Navy, the militias enlisted maroons, and plantation owners cautiously engaged their own slaves to confront the rebels. In contrast to the first phase, the decentralized organization of the rebels meant that the capture of one leader did not turn the tide. The rebellion endured for over a year.

The 1760–61 slave uprising in Jamaica reverberated across the globe. Plantation owners shuddered throughout the Americas as the events in Jamaica had shown that the fear of a widespread, ferocious slave uprising was not just the stuff of their nightmares. Not surprisingly, the English continued to tighten social control, clamping down on Blacks' already limited mobility, and reformed the military and militias. The slave economy rebounded, actually expanding in the late 1760s due to growing demand for sugar in Europe. Terrified by the specter of another slave uprising, Jamaican elites confirmed their allegiance to the English. **In contrast, in North America, the measures taken by the English to strengthen their presence prompted broad resistance, leading to "the backlash that would ultimately split the British Empire in 1776" (p. 219).**

Slaves continued to resist and organize in Jamaica after 1761. The revolts were small and repressed brutally. Authorities responded to rumors of conspiracies with sadistic exaggeration; in Jamaica and on both sides of the Atlantic, racialized discourse and policies hardened in subsequent decades. Brown's final two chapters show just how much the specter of slave uprisings in the three decades between the Tacky Rebellion and the Haitian Revolution marked the Caribbean, shaping everything from trade policies to urban planning. Scholars of the Age of Revolution have much to ponder here. Yet, Brown has more, developing his argument about the global nature of the Coromantee Wars. He not only examines the repercussions of the Tacky Revolt but also highlights the parallels and connections between dozens if not hundreds of eighteenth-century slave conspiracies and uprisings across the Americas and the Caribbean, trans-Atlantic struggles with deep roots in Africa.¹ Scholars of slavery in South America, for example, very well might find that what has been understood as an isolated conflict shares features with Jamaica. In other words, a revolt in Minas Gerais, Brazil or a mutiny in coastal Peru might have links to Western Africa and form part of a long military tradition. Brown has

Choosing quotes wisely: For the sake of clarity and concision, it is important for the reviewer to choose quotes carefully. Quotes worth taking are ones that demonstrate the writer's creativity or wordsmanship, terms that the writer coins within the text, or other phrases that the reviewer could not have said better in their own words.

Here we have a contrast of a great quote pull and a superfluous one. The first quote ("mundane grubby") demonstrates Brown's masterful narration, which Walker (the reviewer) has extolled within this review. It is also a more unconventional description of guerilla warfare that would have been nearly impossible to replicate in other words.

Meanwhile, the second quote on this page about the American Revolution could have been paraphrased and said in many ways without corrupting its meaning.

set an agenda for scholars of slavery across the Americas: the search for these connections and patterns.

Tacky's Revolt brings to mind a masterful lecture, a performance that shines from start to finish. A certain zero-sum notion lurks in historians' minds as we evaluate books. We usually assume that if some section excels, others must not be quite as good. After the brilliant introduction and chapter on Africa, I thought that perhaps the examination of the revolt would lag, leaning on secondary material. This was not the case as the adroit use of more than a dozen maps and Brown's narrative skills bring the reader close to the events and the author makes important points about the geography of rebellion and slave resistance. **Readers have much to learn and ponder here not only about Jamaica and the Atlantic World but also about the craft of history.** I then expected a mere summary of the reverberations in the context of the Seven Year's War and the buildup to the Haitian Revolution. Brown provides this but also develops his fascinating and persuasive argument about how the events in Jamaica constituted one of many conflicts throughout the slaveholding territories of the Americas. He illuminates the connections with Africa and, in a particularly suggestive section, the parallels between slave uprisings big and small. The term Coromantee War thus assumes a different, broader meaning. The level of analysis, research, and storytelling never lag in this superlative and pathbreaking monograph.

Here, the author sums up his major claims. Notice that he references implications for the topic at hand, as well as the field as a whole.

Charles Walker is professor of History at the University of California, Davis. In September 2020, Oxford University Press published his graphic history, *Witness to the Age of Revolution: The Odyssey of Juan Bautista Tupac Amaru*.

1. For data on slave and maroon uprisings in the eighteenth century, see John H. Coatsworth, "Patterns of Rural Rebellion in Latin America: Mexico in Comparative Perspective," Friedrich Katz, ed. *Riot Rebellion, and Revolution: Rural Social Conflict in Mexico* (1988), 21–62, esp. 40.