



## *Introduction*

From 1791 to 1804, enslaved people in the French colony of Saint Domingue secured through war first their freedom from slavery; then the emancipation of all enslaved people in the French empire, albeit temporarily; and finally, their independence from France. Known as the Haitian Revolution, this series of events was monumental, a cataclysmic rupture in the eighteenth-century order of things. The colony's Black revolutionaries had transformed what was initially a well-planned uprising of enslaved people into something else entirely: a new nation based on the permanent absence of slavery in which Haitians could determine their own fate. This nation was both a source of inspiration to enslaved people throughout the Americas, and a warning to elites throughout the hemisphere and Europe that slavery could and would be brought to an end by its victims, if necessary by force.

Before Haiti, only one other nation had declared independence from a European power in the Americas. If this fact is startling to us, the surprise stems from a very long history of making Haiti and the United States seem so unfathomably distant in their origins and histories, rather than two nations that broke away from European colonial powers within three decades of each other. The Haitian Revolution should not be so overshadowed. It was the third great Enlightenment revolution, its story equal in importance to that of the creation of its near neighbour, the United States, and inseparable from the French Revolution. There are even loose parallels between the American and Haitian Revolutions, for in both colonies, colonial elites resented the constraints of European rule, not least the share of their wealth the mother countries claimed, and demanded, initially at

least, representation within metropolitan legislatures. Even the size of the United States is due in part to the Haitian Revolution, as France's impending defeat in Saint Domingue made Napoleon willing to sell the vast Louisiana territories to the United States in 1803. And the histories of the two nations have remained intertwined to the present day, mostly to the Caribbean nation's detriment.

Haiti, however, was different from the other American republics that emerged during the Age of Revolutions in at least two important ways. Slavery was an important factor in nearly all the American revolutions, though to varying degrees, and it would remain so throughout the nineteenth century. As late as the 1870s, slavery was a critical issue animating Cuba's Ten Years War, and one of the stipulations of the armistice agreement that ended this conflict in 1878 was the imposition of a form of gradual emancipation – an apprenticeship period similar to the one used by the British forty years earlier to transition out of slavery in the Caribbean. Yet nowhere else did a slave rebellion lead to national independence – indeed some refer to the Haitian Revolution as the only successful slave rebellion – and nowhere else in the Americas was the new nation an avowedly Black nation. This declaration of Haiti as a Black nation was not a simple reflection of island demography, but a political choice. The 1805 Haitian Constitution declared that every Haitian citizen was Black.

Although the making of Haiti was nothing short of remarkable, in many quarters the Haitian Revolution is still treated as a marginal event within world history. In more than ten years teaching university students in the United States and the United Kingdom, I rarely encounter students who have received significant formal instruction about the Haitian Revolution. Even fewer have learned more about it than they have about either the American or French Revolutions. This inequity is not a coincidence, since the Haitian Revolution is a direct challenge to the stories about the modern world that schools and universities are still invested in telling. In the 1980s, the Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot suggested that the Haitian Revolution had been 'unthinkable'. It had been, in 1791, unimaginable to white elites in France and Saint Domingue – or in any society based around

slavery for that matter – that enslaved people could themselves end slavery. And for France in the nineteenth century, the existence of Haiti was inconvenient to the revolutionary mythology. For to consider the Haitian Revolution and the French Revolution in concert requires squaring the ideas of ‘liberty, fraternity, and equality’ with the fact that Haitian freedom fighters were fighting to have those ideals extended to Black people in the Caribbean. In other words, the Haitian Revolution asked questions that French revolutionary ideas were insufficiently universal to answer.

To the extent that the Haitian Revolution remains less heralded than it should be, it is not for lack of a grand narrative befitting its epic sweep. C.L.R. James’s *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, first published in 1938, remains the classic account of the Haitian Revolution. Indeed, more than 80 years after the first edition, it is still the first book about the Haitian Revolution that many people read. Historians are usually too obsessed with time to be comfortable calling a text timeless, but if it is possible for a book to qualify, then *The Black Jacobins* certainly does. It is an expert blend of engrossing narrative, dense historical research, and compelling characterizations of some of the important figures on the many sides of the conflict, accompanied by an impressive command of the revolution’s sheer complexity. A sports journalist, intellectual, writer, and activist, James researched and wrote the book during one of his most productive periods. During the 1930s, he was a cricket reporter for the *Manchester Guardian*; wrote several other works, including a play about Toussaint Louverture (1936) and *World Revolution, 1917–1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (1937); and founded the International African Friends of Abyssinia (1935), out of which would emerge the International African Service Bureau a few years later.

*The Black Jacobins* tells the story of the Haitian Revolution, from Columbus’s landing on the island of Hispaniola in 1492 to Jean-Jacques Dessalines’s coronation as Emperor of Haiti in late 1804. Yet there is a tension at the heart of the book, which the title foreshadows. On the one hand, this is a story of mass revolution carried out by enslaved people. That James chose to write about a world-historical revolution

was the product of his own political commitments as a Trotskyist and a Pan-Africanist deeply hopeful that African colonies would soon rid themselves of European colonisers. By the second edition's publication in 1963, decolonisation was underway across Africa, and James had turned his hopes toward his own home, the Caribbean, where months earlier, Jamaica and Trinidad had declared independence. That edition is peppered with footnotes redirecting his hopes for African independence in 1938 to West Indian independence, while its appendix, 'From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro', is an essay about the path to independence in the Caribbean. Accordingly, James pays far more attention to the masses, though they are mostly rendered as an undifferentiated block, and to Saint Domingue's shifting, racialised class structures than was common among historians in the 1930s.

Still, for a book that promises to be about mass revolt, *The Black Jacobins* is simultaneously focused on one man, Toussaint Louverture. To be sure, it is not a biography, though it may near hagiography at points, and James' purpose is to tell the story of the Haitian Revolution in full, which is a task at odds with writing a biography of Louverture's life. Louverture did not lead the initial uprisings that began in northern Saint Domingue in August 1791, and he died in France before Haiti would become independent.

Nonetheless, to characterise a Black leader as a political and military genius was as politically important in the 1930s and the 1960s as it is now, and it would be fair to call *The Black Jacobins* a 'great man' history. That a book about mass revolution is so intently focused on the revolution's leader is a prominent tension, but not one that necessarily undermines the text. Narratively, some of the most gripping sections are the middle chapters that serve as a character study of Louverture, charting his rise and fall. It is a real delight to read these sections and come to the slow realisation, sooner than the French do in the narrative, that he is outmanoeuvring them.

Yet the contradiction within the title lingers. For Louverture did not win Haiti's independence on his own – he never stepped foot on the soil of an independent Haiti. And for all of his political genius in wresting power away from the French before they fully realised

what was happening, he was less successful in keeping his people with him. That was in part because Louverture had to navigate his own version of the dilemmas that all post-emancipation societies faced in the nineteenth century, especially those organised wholly around plantation agriculture. From the United States South to the British Caribbean to Brazil and elsewhere, emancipation was a profound economic threat. How could these societies that had become so wealthy through the exports of plantation crops like sugar, coffee, and cotton remain so, when the enslaved labourers that had produced these commodities became freedpeople who were theoretically able to work as they saw fit? As a result, all these societies tried to keep freedpeople tied somehow to plantations by limiting their freedoms. Freedpeople in post-emancipation societies across the Americas found themselves only able to exercise a compromised freedom. And when elites in these societies realised that freedpeople could not be forced to work on plantations to the extent necessary to maintain their wealth, some governments turned to importing indentured labourers from India and China, completely reshaping global connections in the process.

Saint Domingue was not immune to this problem. For much of the 1790s, Saint Domingue's revolutionaries, Louverture foremost among them, prioritised maintaining emancipation over independence. Indeed, complete independence from France did not emerge as a main goal of the revolutionaries until the early 1800s as Napoleon grew intent on restoring firmer French control on the island and, with it, restoring slavery. Louverture believed that in order to maintain a thriving plantation economy free from slavery and under his authority, it was necessary for the colony to remain French. As James tells it, this might have been our hero's fatal flaw. He was too reluctant to fully break ties with France, which led him to rule as an authoritarian might, imposing a series of measures to keep the colony's labourers working on plantations and churning out commodity exports, rather than striking out a new and independent course for the island.

More than 80 years after the first edition's publication, there are undoubtedly signs of age. There is racial terminology no longer in

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common usage. Historians no longer treat the masses of Saint Domingue in the way that James does, as a nearly indistinguishable block of people. The details of Louverture's early life have since come into much clearer focus. Yet *The Black Jacobins* remains remarkably prescient. James wrote an Atlantic history before Braudel wrote about the Mediterranean, and before Atlantic history took root in the historical discipline. And while for nearly four decades there has been a robust strain within British history to understand the British Empire as inseparable from Britain, a similar insight has not taken as firm a hold within French history, even though modern-day France includes overseas departments in the Caribbean.

What is more, besides its prescience and anticipation of scholarly trends, *The Black Jacobins* is simply one of the great works of literature. It is a book to read quickly, in as few sittings as possible. Let the narrative wash over you. Reread it time and again, letting more of the details sink in. It is truly a thrilling read, as one of the great Caribbean intellectuals sweeps us up in the story of the greatest Caribbean revolution and one of the great Caribbean leaders.

CHRISTIENNA FRYAR

## *Foreword*

*The Black Jacobins* was first published in England in 1938, but I had written on the subject before I left Trinidad in 1932. I had had the idea for some time. I was tired of reading and hearing about Africans being persecuted and oppressed in Africa, in the Middle Passage, in the USA and all over the Caribbean. I made up my mind that I would write a book in which Africans or people of African descent instead of constantly being the object of other peoples' exploitation and ferocity would themselves be taking action on a grand scale and shaping other people to their own needs. The books on the Haitian revolution that I had read were of no serious historical value, so as soon as I arrived in England in 1932, I began to look for materials and found only the same shallow ones I had read in the Caribbean. I immediately began to import books from France which dealt seriously with this memorable event in French history.

The book is dedicated to Harry and Elizabeth Spencer. Harry ran a teashop and bakery and was a great friend of mine. He was a cultivated man and I used to talk to him about my writing plans. Whenever a book came from France and I saw something exciting in it, I would report enthusiastically to him. One day he said to me, 'Why are you always talking about this book – why don't you write it?' I told him that I had to go to France to the archives, I didn't have the money as yet but I was saving. He asked me how much money I would need and I told him about a hundred pounds to start with. He left it there but a few days afterwards put ninety pounds in my hands and said, 'On to France, and if you need more, let me know.' As soon as the summer season was over (I was a cricket reporter), off I went and spent six months in France covering ground at a tremendous rate.



I met in Paris Colonel Nemours, a Haitian who had written a military history of the war of independence in San Domingo. Nemours was very happy to find someone, and that person a Caribbean, who was interested in the history of Haiti. He explained the whole thing to me in great detail, using books and coffee cups upon a large table to show how the different campaigns had been fought. To this day I am convinced that, apart from Napoleon himself, no military commanders or strategists of 1793–1815 exceeded Toussaint L'Ouverture and Dessalines.

In England I had been studying marxism and had written a history of the Communist International which involved a fairly close study of the Russian revolution. In France, I read with profit and excitement writers like Jean Jaurès, Mathieu and, above all, Michelet. I was therefore specially prepared to write *The Black Jacobins*, not the least of my qualifications being the fact that I had spent most of my life in a West Indian island not, in fact, too unlike the territory of Haiti. At the same time, I was working closely with George Padmore and his black organization which was centred in London. As will be seen all over and particularly in its last three pages, the book was written not with the Caribbean but with Africa in mind. One great virtue of the book is that it is solidly based upon the upheaval that was taking place in the world between 1789 and 1815. In addition, my West Indian experiences and my study of marxism had made me see what had eluded many previous writers, that it was the slaves who had made the revolution. Many of the slave leaders to the end were unable to read or write and in the archives you can see reports (and admirable reports they are) in which the officer who made it traces his name in ink over a pencil draft prepared for him.

1938 is a long time ago, however, and I waited many years for other people to enter the lists and go further than I was able to go. I was never worried about what they would find, confident that my foundation would remain imperishable. Fouchard, a Haitian historian, has recently published a work which establishes that it was not so much the slaves but the maroons, those who had run away and made a life for themselves in the mountains or forests, who had led the revolutions and created the foundation of the Haitian nation. Hitherto, I and the persons with whom I was politically associated had laid great emphasis on

the fact that the slaves, gathered in hundreds at a time in the sugar factories of the north plain, had owed much of their success to the fact that they had been disciplined, united and organized by the very mechanism of factory production. A Canadian student working on a thesis on the Black masses in the Haitian revolution demonstrated that in the predominantly rural area of Southern Haiti, the slaves, undisciplined by capitalist production, had gathered on a mountain in their search for independence and, persuaded to come back to the plantation, argued like any workers in advanced countries today. They wanted to have three days off from work or two and a half days or at least two days. So now we see that in the Caribbean the slaves in revolution, rural as well as urban, acted automatically as if they were in the second half of the twentieth century. It is obvious to me today, as I saw in 1938, that further study of the revolution in French San Domingo will reveal more and more of its affinity with revolutions in more developed communities.

Let me end this foreword with one of the most remarkable experiences of *The Black Jacobins*. During the celebrations of the independence of Ghana in 1957, I met some Pan-African young men from South Africa who told me that my book had been of great service to them. I wondered how and they explained to me. A copy of it was in the library of the Black university in South Africa, though they didn't know anything about it until a white professor there told them: 'I suggest that you read *The Black Jacobins* in the library; you may find it useful.' Eagerly they got the book, read it and found it a revelation, particularly in the relation between the blacks and the mulattoes. That relation they found very important for understanding the relation between the Black South Africans and the Coloureds who are people of mixed race, black and white. They typed out copies, mimeographed them and circulated the passages from *The Black Jacobins* dealing with the relations between the blacks and the mixed in Haiti. I could not help thinking that revolution moves in a mysterious way its wonders to perform.



## *Preface to the First Edition*

In 1789 the French West Indian colony of San Domingo supplied two-thirds of the overseas trade of France and was the greatest individual market for the European slave-trade. It was an integral part of the economic life of the age, the greatest colony in the world, the pride of France, and the envy of every other imperialist nation. The whole structure rested on the labour of half-a-million slaves.

In August 1791, after two years of the French Revolution and its repercussions in San Domingo, the slaves revolted. The struggle lasted for twelve years. The slaves defeated in turn the local whites and the soldiers of the French monarchy, a Spanish invasion, a British expedition of some 60,000 men, and a French expedition of similar size under Bonaparte's brother-in-law. The defeat of Bonaparte's expedition in 1803 resulted in the establishment of the Negro state of Haiti which has lasted to this day.

The revolt is the only successful slave revolt in history, and the odds it had to overcome is evidence of the magnitude of the interests that were involved. The transformation of slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organize themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement. Why and how this happened is the theme of this book.

By a phenomenon often observed, the individual leadership responsible for this unique achievement was almost entirely the work of a single man – Toussaint L'Ouverture. Beauchamp in the *Biographie Universelle* calls Toussaint L'Ouverture one of the most remarkable men of a period rich in remarkable men. He dominated from his entry until circumstances removed him from the scene. The history

of the San Domingo revolution will therefore largely be a record of his achievements and his political personality. The writer believes, and is confident the narrative will prove, that between 1789 and 1815, with the single exception of Bonaparte himself, no single figure appeared on the historical stage more greatly gifted than this Negro, a slave till he was forty-five. Yet Toussaint did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made Toussaint. And even that is not the whole truth.

The writing of history becomes ever more difficult. The power of God or the weakness of man, Christianity or the divine right of kings to govern wrong, can easily be made responsible for the downfall of states and the birth of new societies. Such elementary conceptions lend themselves willingly to narrative treatment and from Tacitus to Macaulay, from Thucydides to Green, the traditionally famous historians have been more artist than scientist: they wrote so well because they saw so little. Today by a natural reaction we tend to a personification of the social forces, great men being merely or nearly instruments in the hands of economic destiny. As so often the truth does not lie in between. Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make. Their freedom of achievement is limited by the necessities of their environment. To portray the limits of those necessities and the realization, complete or partial, of all possibilities, that is the true business of the historian.

In a revolution, when the ceaseless slow accumulation of centuries bursts into volcanic eruption, the meteoric flares and flights above are a meaningless chaos and lend themselves to infinite caprice and romanticism unless the observer sees them always as projections of the sub-soil from which they came. The writer has sought not only to analyse, but to demonstrate in their movement, the economic forces of the age; their moulding of society and politics, of men in the mass and individual men; the powerful reaction of these on their environment at one of those rare moments when society is at boiling point and therefore fluid.

The analysis is the science and the demonstration the art which is history. The violent conflicts of our age enable our practised vision to see into the very bones of previous revolutions more easily than heretofore. Yet for that very reason it is impossible to recollect

historical emotions in that tranquillity which a great English writer, too narrowly, associated with poetry alone.

Tranquillity today is either innate (the philistine) or to be acquired only by a deliberate doping of the personality. It was in the stillness of a seaside suburb that could be heard most clearly and insistently the booming of Franco's heavy artillery, the rattle of Stalin's firing squads and the fierce shrill turmoil of the revolutionary movement striving for clarity and influence. Such is our age and this book is of it, with something of the fever and the fret. Nor does the writer regret it. The book is the history of a revolution and written under different circumstances it would have been a different but not necessarily a better book.

C. L. R. JAMES



# *The Black Jacobins*





## *Prologue*

Christopher Columbus landed first in the New World at the island of San Salvador, and after praising God enquired urgently for gold. The natives, Red Indians, were peaceable and friendly and directed him to Haiti, a large island (nearly as large as Ireland), rich, they said, in the yellow metal. He sailed to Haiti. One of his ships being wrecked, the Haitian Indians helped him so willingly that very little was lost and of the articles which they brought on shore not one was stolen.

The Spaniards, the most advanced Europeans of their day, annexed the island, called it Hispaniola, and took the backward natives under their protection. They introduced Christianity, forced labour in mines, murder, rape, bloodhounds, strange diseases, and artificial famine (by the destruction of cultivation to starve the rebellious). These and other requirements of the higher civilization reduced the native population from an estimated half-a-million, perhaps a million, to 60,000 in fifteen years.

Las Casas, a Dominican priest with a conscience, travelled to Spain to plead for the abolition of native slavery. But without coercion of the natives how could the colony exist? All the natives received as wages was Christianity and they could be good Christians without working in the mines.

The Spanish Government compromised. It abolished the *repartimientos*, or forced labour, in law while its agents in the colony maintained it in fact. Las Casas, haunted at the prospect of seeing before his eyes the total destruction of a population within one generation, hit on the expedient of importing the more robust Negroes from a populous Africa; in 1517, Charles V authorized the export of

15,000 slaves to San Domingo, and thus priest and King launched on the world the American slave-trade and slavery.

The Spanish settlement founded by Columbus was on the south-east of the island. In 1629 some wandering Frenchmen sought a home in the little island of Tortuga, six miles off the north coast of San Domingo, to be followed by Englishmen, and Dutchmen from Santa Cruz. Tortuga was healthy and in the forests of western San Domingo roamed millions of wild cattle which could be hunted for food and hides. To Tortuga came fugitives from justice, escaped galley-slaves, debtors unable to pay their bills, adventurers seeking adventure or quick fortunes, men of all crimes and all nationalities. French, British and Spaniards slaughtered one another for nearly thirty years, and the British were actually in possession of Tortuga at one time, but by 1659 the French buccaneers prevailed. They sought the suzerainty of France and demanded a chief and some women. From Tortuga they laid a firm basis in San Domingo and moved there. To drive away these persistent intruders the Spaniards organized a great hunt and killed all the bulls they could find in order to ruin the cattle business. The French retaliated by the cultivation of cocoa; then indigo and cotton. Already they knew the sugar-cane. Lacking capital they raided the English island of Jamaica and stole money and 2,000 Negroes. French, British and Spaniards raided and counter-raided and burnt to the ground, but in 1695 the Treaty of Ryswick between France and Spain gave the French a legal right to the western part of the island. In 1734 the colonists began to cultivate coffee. The land was fertile, France offered a good market. But they wanted labour. In addition to Negroes, they brought whites, the *engagés*, who would be freed after a period of years. So little did they bring the Negroes because these were barbarous or black, that the early laws prescribed similar regulations for both black slaves and white *engagés*. But under the regimen of those days the whites could not stand the climate. So the slavers brought more and more Negroes, in numbers that leapt by thousands every year, until the drain from Africa ran into millions.

# I

## *The Property*

The slavers scoured the coasts of Guinea. As they devastated an area they moved westward and then south, decade after decade, past the Niger, down the Congo coast, past Loango and Angola, round the Cape of Good Hope, and, by 1789, even as far as Mozambique on the eastern side of Africa. Guinea remained their chief hunting ground. From the coast they organized expeditions far into the interior. They set the simple tribesmen fighting against each other with modern weapons over thousands of square miles. The propagandists of the time claimed that however cruel was the slave traffic, the African slave in America was happier than in his own African civilization. Ours, too, is an age of propaganda. We excel our ancestors only in system and organization: they lied as fluently and as brazenly. In the sixteenth century, Central Africa was a territory of peace and happy civilization.<sup>1</sup> Traders travelled thousands of miles from one side of the continent to another without molestation. The tribal wars from which the European pirates claimed to deliver the people were mere sham-fights; it was a great battle when half-a-dozen men were killed. It was on a peasantry in many respects superior to the serfs in large areas of Europe, that the slave-trade fell. Tribal life was broken up and millions of detribalized Africans were let loose upon each other. The unceasing destruction of crops led to cannibalism; the captive women became concubines and degraded the status of the wife. Tribes had to supply slaves or be sold as slaves themselves. Violence and ferocity became the necessities for survival, and violence and ferocity survived.<sup>2</sup> The stockades of grinning skulls, the human sacrifices, the selling of their own children as slaves, these horrors were the product of an intolerable pressure on the African peoples, which

became fiercer through the centuries as the demands of industry increased and the methods of coercion were perfected.

The slaves were collected in the interior, fastened one to the other in columns, loaded with heavy stones of forty or fifty pounds in weight to prevent attempts at escape, and then marched the long journey to the sea, sometimes hundreds of miles, the weakly and sick dropping to die in the African jungle. Some were brought to the coast by canoe, lying in the bottom of boats for days on end, their hands bound, their faces exposed to the tropical sun and the tropical rain, their backs in the water which was never bailed out. At the slave ports they were penned into 'trunks' for the inspection of the buyers. Night and day thousands of human beings were packed in these 'dens of putrefaction' so that no European could stay in them for longer than a quarter of an hour without fainting. The Africans fainted and recovered or fainted and died, the mortality in the 'trunks' being over twenty per cent. Outside in the harbour, waiting to empty the 'trunks' as they filled, was the captain of the slave-ship, with so clear a conscience that one of them, in the intervals of waiting to enrich British capitalism with the profits of another valuable cargo, enriched British religion by composing the hymn 'How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds'!

On the ships the slaves were packed in the hold on galleries one above the other. Each was given only four or five feet in length and two or three feet in height, so that they could neither lie at full length nor sit upright. Contrary to the lies that have been spread so pertinaciously about Negro docility, the revolts at the port of embarkation and on board were incessant, so that the slaves had to be chained, right hand to right leg, left hand to left leg, and attached in rows to long iron bars. In this position they lived for the voyage, coming up once a day for exercise and to allow the sailors to 'clean the pails'. But when the cargo was rebellious or the weather bad, then they stayed below for weeks at a time. The close proximity of so many naked human beings, their bruised and festering flesh, the foetid air, the prevailing dysentery, the accumulation of filth, turned these holds into a hell. During the storms the hatches were battened down, and in the close and loathsome darkness they were hurled from one side to another by the

heaving vessel, held in position by the chains on their bleeding flesh. No place on earth, observed one writer of the time, concentrated so much misery as the hold of a slave-ship.

Twice a day, at nine and at four, they received their food. To the slave-traders they were articles of trade and no more. A captain held up by calms or adverse winds was known to have poisoned his cargo.<sup>3</sup> Another killed some of his slaves to feed the others with the flesh. They died not only from the régime but from grief and rage and despair. They undertook vast hunger strikes; undid their chains and hurled themselves on the crew in futile attempts at insurrection. What could these inland tribesmen do on the open sea, in a complicated sailing vessel? To brighten their spirits it became the custom to have them up on the deck once a day and force them to dance. Some took the opportunity to jump overboard, uttering cries of triumph as they cleared the vessel and disappeared below the surface.

Fear of their cargo bred a savage cruelty in the crew. One captain, to strike terror into the rest, killed a slave and dividing heart, liver and entrails into 300 pieces made each of the slaves eat one, threatening those who refused with the same torture.<sup>4</sup> Such incidents were not rare. Given the circumstances such things were (and are) inevitable. Nor did the system spare the slavers. Every year one-fifth of all who took part in the African trade died.

All America and the West Indies took slaves. When the ship reached the harbour, the cargo came up on deck to be bought. The purchasers examined them for defects, looked at the teeth, pinched the skin, sometimes tasted the perspiration to see if the slave's blood was pure and his health as good as his appearance. Some of the women affected a curiosity, the indulgence of which, with a horse, would have caused them to be kicked twenty yards across the deck. But the slave had to stand it. Then in order to restore the dignity which might have been lost by too intimate an examination, the purchaser spat in the face of the slave. Having become the property of his owner, he was branded on both sides of the breast with a hot iron. His duties were explained to him by an interpreter, and a priest instructed him in the first principles of Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

The stranger in San Domingo was awakened by the cracks of the whip, the stifled cries, and the heavy groans of the Negroes who saw the sun rise only to curse it for its renewal of their labours and their pains. Their work began at day-break: at eight they stopped for a short breakfast and worked again till midday. They began again at two o'clock and worked until evening, sometimes till ten or eleven. A Swiss traveller<sup>6</sup> has left a famous description of a gang of slaves at work. 'They were about a hundred men and women of different ages, all occupied in digging ditches in a cane-field, the majority of them naked or covered with rags. The sun shone down with full force on their heads. Sweat rolled from all parts of their bodies. Their limbs, weighed down by the heat, fatigued with the weight of their picks and by the resistance of the clayey soil baked hard enough to break their implements, strained themselves to overcome every obstacle. A mournful silence reigned. Exhaustion was stamped on every face, but the hour of rest had not yet come. The pitiless eye of the Manager patrolled the gang and several foremen armed with long whips moved periodically between them, giving stinging blows to all who, worn out by fatigue, were compelled to take a rest – men or women, young or old.' This was no isolated picture. The sugar plantations demanded an exacting and ceaseless labour. The tropical earth is baked hard by the sun. Round every 'carry' of land intended for cane it was necessary to dig a large ditch to ensure circulation of air. Young canes required attention for the first three or four months and grew to maturity in fourteen or eighteen months. Cane could be planted and would grow at any time of the year, and the reaping of one crop was the signal for the immediate digging of ditches and the planting of another. Once cut they had to be rushed to the mill lest the juice became acid by fermentation. The extraction of the juice and manufacture of the raw sugar went on for three weeks a month, sixteen or eighteen hours a day, for seven or eight months in the year.

Worked like animals, the slaves were housed like animals, in huts built around a square planted with provisions and fruits. These huts were about 20 to 25 feet long, twelve feet wide and about fifteen feet in height, divided by partitions into two or three rooms. They were windowless and light entered only by the door. The floor was beaten

earth; the bed was of straw, hides or a rude contrivance of cords tied on posts. On these slept indiscriminately mother, father and children. Defenceless against their masters, they struggled with overwork and its usual complement – underfeeding. The Negro Code, Louis XIV's attempt to ensure them humane treatment, ordered that they should be given, every week, two pots and a half of manioc, three cassavas, two pounds of salt beef or three pounds of salted fish – about food enough to last a healthy man for three days. Instead their masters gave them half-a-dozen pints of coarse flour, rice, or pease, and half-a-dozen herrings. Worn out by their labours all through the day and far into the night, many neglected to cook and ate the food raw. The ration was so small and given to them so irregularly that often the last half of the week found them with nothing.

Even the two hours they were given in the middle of the day, and the holidays on Sundays and feast-days, were not for rest, but in order that they might cultivate a small piece of land to supplement their regular rations. Hard-working slaves cultivated vegetables and raised chickens to sell in the towns to make a little in order to buy rum and tobacco; and here and there a Napoleon of finance, by luck and industry, could make enough to purchase his freedom. Their masters encouraged them in this practice of cultivation, for in years of scarcity the Negroes died in thousands, epidemics broke out, the slaves fled into the woods and plantations were ruined.

The difficulty was that though one could trap them like animals, transport them in pens, work them alongside an ass or a horse and beat both with the same stick, stable them and starve them, they remained, despite their black skins and curly hair, quite invincibly human beings; with the intelligence and resentments of human beings. To cow them into the necessary docility and acceptance necessitated a régime of calculated brutality and terrorism, and it is this that explains the unusual spectacle of property-owners apparently careless of preserving their property: they had first to ensure their own safety.

For the least fault the slaves received the harshest punishment. In 1685 the Negro Code authorized whipping, and in 1702 one colonist, a Marquis, thought any punishment which demanded more than 100



blows of the whip was serious enough to be handed over to the authorities. Later the number was fixed at thirty-nine, then raised to fifty. But the colonists paid no attention to these regulations and slaves were not unfrequently whipped to death. The whip was not always an ordinary cane or woven cord, as the Code demanded. Sometimes it was replaced by the *rigoise* or thick thong of cow-hide, or by the *lianes* – local growths of reeds, supple and pliant like whalebone. The slaves received the whip with more certainty and regularity than they received their food. It was the incentive to work and the guardian of discipline. But there was no ingenuity that fear or a depraved imagination could devise which was not employed to break their spirit and satisfy the lusts and resentment of their owners and guardians – irons on the hands and feet, blocks of wood that the slaves had to drag behind them wherever they went, the tin-plate mask designed to prevent the slaves eating the sugar-cane, the iron collar. Whipping was interrupted in order to pass a piece of hot wood on the buttocks of the victim; salt, pepper, citron, cinders, aloes, and hot ashes were poured on the bleeding wounds. Mutilations were common, limbs, ears, and sometimes the private parts, to deprive them of the pleasures which they could indulge in without expense. Their masters poured burning wax on their arms and hands and shoulders, emptied the boiling cane sugar over their heads, burned them alive, roasted them on slow fires, filled them with gunpowder and blew them up with a match; buried them up to the neck and smeared their heads with sugar that the flies might devour them; fastened them near to nests of ants or wasps; made them eat their excrement, drink their urine, and lick the saliva of other slaves. One colonist was known in moments of anger to throw himself on his slaves and stick his teeth into their flesh.<sup>7</sup>

Were these tortures, so well authenticated, habitual or were they merely isolated incidents, the extravagances of a few half-crazed colonists? Impossible as it is to substantiate hundreds of cases, yet all the evidence shows that these bestial practices were normal features of slave life. The torture of the whip, for instance, had ‘a thousand refinements’, but there were regular varieties that had special names, so common were they. When the hands and arms were tied to four posts

on the ground, the slave was said to undergo 'the four-post'. If the slave was tied to a ladder it was 'the torture of the ladder'; if he was suspended by four limbs it was 'the hammock', etc. The pregnant woman was not spared her 'four-post'. A hole was dug in the earth to accommodate the unborn child. The torture of the collar was specially reserved for women who were suspected of abortion, and the collar never left their necks until they had produced a child. The blowing up of a slave had its own name – 'to burn a little powder in the arse of a nigger': obviously this was no freak but a recognized practice.

After an exhaustive examination, the best that de Vaissière can say is that there were good masters and there were bad, and his impression, 'but only an impression', is that the former were more numerous than the latter.

There are and always will be some who, ashamed of the behaviour of their ancestors, try to prove that slavery was not so bad after all, that its evils and its cruelty were the exaggerations of propagandists and not the habitual lot of the slaves. Men will say (and accept) anything in order to foster national pride or soothe a troubled conscience. Undoubtedly there were kind masters who did not indulge in these refinements of cruelty and whose slaves merely suffered over-work, under-nourishment and the whip. But the slaves in San Domingo could not replenish their number by reproduction. After that dreaded journey across the ocean a woman was usually sterile for two years. The life in San Domingo killed them off fast. The planters deliberately worked them to death rather than wait for children to grow up. But the professional white-washers are assisted by the writings of a few contemporary observers who described scenes of idyllic beauty. One of these is Vaublanc, whom we shall meet again, and whose testimony we will understand better when we know more of him. In his memoirs<sup>8</sup> he shows us a plantation on which there were no prisons, no dungeons, no punishments to speak of. If the slaves were naked the climate was such as not to render this an evil, and those who complained forgot the perfectly disgusting rags that were so often seen in France. The slaves were exempt from unhealthy, fatiguing, dangerous work such as was performed by the workers in Europe. They did not have to descend into the bowels of

the earth nor dig deep pits; they did not construct subterranean galleries; they did not work in the factories where French workers breathed a deadly and infected air; they did not mount elevated roofs; they did not carry enormous burdens. The slaves, he concluded, had light work to do and were happy to do it. Vaublanc, in San Domingo so sympathetic to the sorrows of labour in France, had to fly from Paris in August 1792, to escape the wrath of the French workers.

Malouet, who was an official in the colonies and fellow-reactionary of Vaublanc against all change in the colonies, also sought to give some ideas of the privileges of slavery. The first he notes is that the slave, on attaining his majority, begins to enjoy 'the pleasures of love', and his master has no interest in preventing the indulgence of his tastes.<sup>9</sup> To such impertinent follies can the defence of property drive even an intelligent man, supposed in his time to be sympathetic towards the blacks.

The majority of the slaves accommodated themselves to this unceasing brutality by a profound fatalism and a wooden stupidity before their masters. 'Why do you ill-treat your mule in that way?' asked a colonist of a carter. 'But when I do not work, I am beaten, when he does not work, I beat him – he is my Negro.' One old Negro, having lost one of his ears and condemned to lose another, begged the Governor to spare it, for if that too was cut off he would have nowhere to put his stump of cigarette. A slave sent by his master into his neighbour's garden to steal, is caught and brought back to the man who had only a few minutes before despatched him on the errand. The master orders him a punishment of 100 lashes to which the slave submits without a murmur. When caught in error they persisted in denial with the same fatalistic stupidity. A slave is accused of stealing a pigeon. He denies it. The pigeon is discovered hidden in his shirt. 'Well, well, look at that pigeon. It take my shirt for a nest.' Through the shirt of another, a master can feel the potatoes which he denies he has stolen. They are not potatoes, he says, they are stones. He is undressed and the potatoes fall to the ground. 'Eh! master. The devil is wicked. Put stones, and look, you find potatoes.'

On holidays when not working on their private plots, or dancing,

they sat for hours in front of their huts giving no sign of life. Wives and husbands, children and parents, were separated at the will of the master, and a father and son would meet after many years and give no greeting or any sign of emotion. Many slaves could never be got to stir at all unless they were whipped.<sup>10</sup> Suicide was a common habit, and such was their disregard for life that they often killed themselves, not for personal reasons, but in order to spite their owner. Life was hard and death, they believed, meant not only release but a return to Africa. Those who wished to believe and to convince the world that the slaves were half-human brutes, fit for nothing else but slavery, could find ample evidence for their faith, and in nothing so much as in this homicidal mania of the slaves.

Poison was their method. A mistress would poison a rival to retain the valuable affections of her inconstant owner. A discarded mistress would poison master, wife, children and slaves. A slave robbed of his wife by one of his masters would poison him, and this was one of the most frequent causes of poisoning.<sup>11</sup> If a planter conceived a passion for a young slave, her mother would poison his wife with the idea of placing her daughter at the head of the household. The slaves would poison the younger children of a master in order to ensure the plantation succeeding to one son. By this means they prevented the plantation being broken up and the gang dispersed. On certain plantations the slaves decimated their number by poison so as to keep the number of slaves small and prevent their masters embarking on larger schemes which would increase the work. For this reason a slave would poison his wife, another would poison his children, and a Negro nurse declared in court that for years she had poisoned every child that she brought into the world. Nurses employed in hospitals poisoned sick soldiers to rid themselves of unpleasant work. The slaves would even poison the property of a master whom they loved. He was going away; they poisoned cows, horses and mules, the plantation was thrown into disorder, and the beloved master was compelled to remain. The most dreadful of all this cold-blooded murder was, however, the jaw-sickness – a disease which attacked children only, in the first few days of their existence. Their jaws were closed to such an extent that it was impossible to open them and to get anything down, with the

result that they died of hunger. It was not a natural disease and never attacked children delivered by white women. The Negro midwives alone could cause it, and it is believed that they performed some simple operation on the newly born child which resulted in the jaw-sickness. Whatever the method this disease caused the death of nearly one-third of the children born on the plantations.

What was the intellectual level of these slaves? The planters, hating them, called them by every opprobrious name. 'The Negroes,' says a memoir published in 1789, 'are unjust, cruel, barbarous, half-human, treacherous, deceitful, thieves, drunkards, proud, lazy, unclean, shameless, jealous to fury, and cowards.' It was by sentiments such as these that they strove to justify the abominable cruelties they practised. And they took great pains that the Negro should remain the brute beast they wanted him to be. 'The safety of the whites demands that we keep the Negroes in the most profound ignorance. I have reached the stage of believing firmly that one must treat the Negroes as one treats beasts.' Such is the opinion of the Governor of Martinique in a letter addressed to the Minister and such was the opinion of all colonists. Except for the Jews, who spared no energy in making Israelites of their slaves, the majority of the colonists religiously kept all instruction, religious or otherwise, away from the slaves.

Naturally there were all types of men among them, ranging from native chieftains, as was the father of Toussaint L'Ouverture, to men who had been slaves in their own country. The creole Negro was more docile than the slave who had been born in Africa. Some said he was more intelligent. Others doubted that there was much difference though the creole slave knew the language and was more familiar with his surroundings and his work. Yet those who took the trouble to observe them away from their masters and in their intercourse with each other did not fail to see that remarkable liveliness of intellect and vivacity of spirit which so distinguish their descendants in the West Indies today. Father du Tertre, who knew them well, noted their secret pride and feeling of superiority to their masters, the difference between their behaviour before their masters and when they were by themselves. De Wimpffen, an exceptionally observant and

able traveller, was also astonished at this dual personality of the slaves. 'One has to hear with what warmth and what volubility, and at the same time with what precision of ideas and accuracy of judgment, this creature, heavy and taciturn all day, now squatting before his fire, tells stories, talks, gesticulates, argues, passes opinions, approves or condemns both his master and everyone who surrounds him.' It was this intelligence which refused to be crushed, these latent possibilities, that frightened the colonists, as it frightens the whites in Africa today. 'No species of men has more intelligence,' wrote Hilliard d'Auberteuil, a colonist, in 1784, and had his book banned.

But one does not need education or encouragement to cherish a dream of freedom. At their midnight celebrations of Voodoo, their African cult, they danced and sang, usually this favourite song:

Eh! Eh! Bomba! Heu! Heu!

Canga, bafio té!

Canga, mouné de lé!

Canga, do ki la!

Canga, li!

'We swear to destroy the whites and all that they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep this vow.'

The colonists knew this song and tried to stamp it out, and the Voodoo cult with which it was linked. In vain. For over two hundred years the slaves sang it at their meetings, as the Jews in Babylon sang of Zion, and the Bantu today sing in secret the national anthem of Africa.<sup>12</sup>

All the slaves, however, did not undergo this régime. There was a small privileged caste, the foremen of the gangs, coachmen, cooks, butlers, maids, nurses, female companions, and other house-servants. These repaid their kind treatment and comparatively easy life with a strong attachment to their masters, and have thus enabled Tory historians, regius professors and sentimentalists to represent plantation slavery as a patriarchal relation between master and slave. Permeated with the vices of their masters and mistresses, these

upper servants gave themselves airs and despised the slaves in the fields. Dressed in cast-off silks and brocades, they gave balls in which, like trained monkeys, they danced minuets and quadrilles, and bowed and curtsied in the fashion of Versailles. But a few of these used their position to cultivate themselves, to gain a little education, to learn all they could. The leaders of a revolution are usually those who have been able to profit by the cultural advantages of the system they are attacking, and the San Domingo revolution was no exception to this rule.

Christophe, afterwards Emperor of Haiti, was a slave – a waiter in a public hotel at Cap François, where he made use of his opportunities to gain a knowledge of men and of the world. Toussaint L'Ouverture<sup>13</sup> also belonged to this small and privileged caste. His father, son of a petty chieftain in Africa, was captured in war, sold as a slave and made the journey in a slave-ship. He was bought by a colonist of some sensibility, who, recognizing that this Negro was an unusual person, allowed him a certain liberty on the plantation and the use of five slaves to cultivate a plot of land. He became a Catholic, married a woman who was both beautiful and good, and Toussaint was the eldest of his eight children. Near to the household lived an old Negro, Pierre Baptiste, remarkable for his integrity of character and a smattering of knowledge. The Negroes spoke a debased French known as creole. But Pierre knew French, also a little Latin and a little geometry, which he had learned from a missionary. Pierre Baptiste became Toussaint's godfather and taught his godson the rudiments of French; using the services of the Catholic Church he instructed him also in the rudiments of Latin; Toussaint learned also to draw. The young slaves had the care of the flocks and herds, and this was Toussaint's early occupation. But his father, like many other Africans, had some knowledge of medicinal plants and taught Toussaint what he knew. The elements of an education, his knowledge of herbs, his unusual intelligence, singled him out, and he was made coachman to his master. This brought him further means of comfort and self-education. Ultimately he was made steward of all the live-stock on the estate – a responsible post which was usually held by a white man. If Toussaint's genius came from where

genius comes, yet circumstances conspired to give him exceptional parents and friends and a kind master.

But the number of slaves who occupied positions with such opportunities was infinitely small in comparison with the hundreds of thousands who bore on their bent backs the whole structure of San Domingo society. All of them did not submit to it. Those whose boldness of spirit found slavery intolerable and refused to evade it by committing suicide, would fly to the woods and mountains and form bands of free men – maroons. They fortified their fastnesses with palisades and ditches. Women followed them. They reproduced themselves. And for a hundred years before 1789 the maroons were a source of danger to the colony. In 1720, 1,000 slaves fled to the mountains. In 1751 there were at least 3,000 of them. Usually they formed separate bands, but periodically they found a chief who was strong enough to unite the different sections. Many of these rebel leaders struck terror into the hearts of the colonists by their raids on the plantations and the strength and determination of the resistance they organized against attempts to exterminate them. The greatest of these chiefs was Mackandal.

He conceived the bold design of uniting all the Negroes and driving the whites out of the colony. He was a Negro from Guinea who had been a slave in the district of Limbé, later to become one of the great centres of the revolution. Mackandal was an orator, in the opinion of a white contemporary equal in eloquence to the European orators of the day, and different only in his superior strength and vigour. He was fearless and, though one-handed from an accident, had a fortitude of spirit which he knew how to preserve in the midst of the most cruel tortures. He claimed to predict the future; like Mahomet he had revelations; he persuaded his followers that he was immortal and exercised such a hold over them that they considered it an honour to serve him on their knees; the handsomest women fought for the privilege of being admitted to his bed. Not only did his band raid and pillage plantations far and wide, but he himself ranged from plantation to plantation to make converts, stimulate his followers, and perfect his great plan for the destruction of white civilization in San Domingo. An uninstructed mass, feeling



its way to revolution, usually begins by terrorism, and Mackandal aimed at delivering his people by means of poison. For six years he built up his organization, he and his followers poisoning not only whites but disobedient members of their own band. Then he arranged that on a particular day the water of every house in the capital of the province was to be poisoned, and the general attack made on the whites while they were in the convulsions and anguish of death. He had lists of all members of his party in each slave gang; appointed captains, lieutenants and other officers; arranged for bands of Negroes to leave the town and spread over the plains to massacre the whites. His temerity was the cause of his downfall. He went one day to a plantation, got drunk and was betrayed, and being captured was burnt alive.

The Mackandal rebellion never reached fruition and it was the only hint of an organized attempt at revolt during the hundred years preceding the French Revolution. The slaves seemed eternally resigned, though here and there a slave was manumitted or purchased his freedom from his owner. From their masters came no talk of future emancipation. The San Domingo colonists said that slavery was necessary, and for them that finished the argument. Legislation passed for the protection of the slaves remained on paper in face of the dictum that a man could do as he liked with his own. 'All laws, however just and humane they may be, in favour of Negroes will always be a violation of the rights of property if they are not sponsored by the colonists . . . All laws on property are just only if they are supported by the opinion of those who are interested in them as proprietors.' This was still white opinion at the beginning of the French Revolution. Not only planters but officials made it quite clear that whatever the penalties for the ill-treatment of slaves, these could never be enforced. The slaves might understand that they had rights, which would be fatal to the peace and well-being of the colony. That was why a colonist never hesitated at the mutilation, the torture or the murder of a slave who had cost him thousands of francs. 'The Ivory Coast is a good mother' was a colonial proverb. Slaves could always be bought, and profits were always high.