# Sea Change: Coffee and "Plantations for the Poorer Sort"

**Michelle Craig McDonald**

**Richard Stockton College**

---

A paper presented at
"Economic History's Many Muses"
Fourteenth Annual Conference of the
Program in Early American Economy and Society
October 24-25, 2014

Library Company of Philadelphia
1314 Locust Street, Philadelphia PA

Sir Nicholas Lawes served as governor of Jamaica from 1718 to 1722. While his term was brief, the business he oversaw in office touched on many of the central problems facing the Caribbean colony following its first half-century under British control. In 1720, he negotiated a treaty with Jeremy, King of the Mosquito Indians, to hire a regiment of fifty men from Central America—near what is now the eastern coast of Nicaragua and Honduras—to track and return runaway slaves from Jamaica's mountainous interior. Two years later, he helped bring the British colony back from the brink of economic collapse following one of the most devastating hurricanes of the early eighteenth century. "Wee were left destitute of any other coverings than the Heavens," he wrote to the Council of Trade and Plantations in London, reputedly even selling some of his own property to help defray the expenses of government. But Lawes is probably best remembered for presiding over the trials of Captain John Rackham—otherwise known as "Calico Jack"—and ten others accused of piracy in June of 1721, including the infamous female pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read who fled to Jamaica after learning of their indictment on Providence Island.[1]

After four years at the head of Jamaican politics, however, Lawes returned to his estate in Liguanea, just north of Kingston, to resume management of his plantation and engage in the agricultural experimentation that had brought him to the island in the first place. He died only nine years later, but in these last years provided a more enduring legacy for Jamaica—as well as the rest of the Americas—than his treaties with native peoples, efforts to recapture runaway slaves, sacrifices for hurricane relief, or even prosecution of pirates. For in 1728 Lawes planted Jamaica's first seven coffee trees on his Townwell Estate. Although he died before the plants reached maturity, the crop showed enough promise to encourage more than twenty of his fellow planters to petition Whitehall for a protectionist tariff. Parliament responded with "An Act for

---

[1] Note that Lawes appears as Laws in some historical records. See "Extracts from the Journals of the House of Assembly, Jamaica, June 1720," in *British and Foreign State Papers, 1849-1850 (1); compiled by the Librarian and Keeper of the Papers, Foreign Office*, vol. 38 (London: Harrison and Sons, 1862), pp. 703-705. The record of Lawes' property sale to raise funds for Jamaican governance can be found in George Wilson Bridges (ed.), *The Annals of Jamaica*, vol. 1 (London: John Murrey, Albermarle Street, 1828), p. 352; for descriptions of the impact of that 1722 hurricane, see Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the Greater British Caribbean, 1624-1783* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2006), pp. 29 and 99. For information about Lawes' role in the piracy trials of 1721, see: *The Tryals of Captain Jack Rackham and other Pirates* (Jamaica: Robert B Baldwin, 1721); *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series*, vol. 32 (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1964), p. 334; and Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), pp. 103-112. Rackham and four other accused pirates were quickly convicted and hanged; while both Read and Bonny were likewise convicted, they both pled pregnancy and so received a stay of execution.

Encouraging the Growth of Coffee in his Majesty's Plantations in America" in 1732, the first of several laws that sought to build a British Caribbean coffee economy.[2]

Between 1730 and 1770 coffee cultivation expanded tremendously throughout the Caribbean. In many cases, only sugar was more profitable, and in a few colonies coffee surpassed even that. Just before the slave revolution in French Saint Domingue, for example, coffee exports rivaled the value of white sugar, and equaled more than two-thirds that of raw sugar. Between 1805 and 1814, Jamaica's annual income from coffee exports grew to nearly half that of sugar. In Spanish Puerto Rico more acres of coffee were planted during the first four decades of the nineteenth century than in any other commodity, while in Cuba coffee exports grew steadily after 1790 until by 1827 there were twice as many coffee haciendas as sugar mills.[3] Such impressive figures from the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, however, belie the central characteristic of early Caribbean coffee farms—most remained small. Indeed, coffee was touted as the ideal "poor man's crop," and according to one British contemporary a handful of arable acres and a few slaves could turn a profit.

## Building the Industry

Dutch and French merchants pioneered transplantation of coffee to the Americas, but British planters were not far behind. In 1727 James Douglas, a British botanist and physician, published a pamphlet that recounted the arrival of coffee to Barbados from Surinam as early as 1720. Douglas also noted that Barbados' governor subsequently shipped several trees back to England, including to the gardens of George I, the Prince of Wales, and the Duke of Chandos, strong evidence of how high interest in the commodity rose in political ranks. But the island's near total commitment to sugar by the mid-seventeenth century, along with its flat topography inhospitable for growing Arabica, led these experiment to founder. It was in Jamaica, with its

---

[2] Benjamin Moseley, *A Treatise Concerning the Properties and Effects of Coffee,* 5th ed. (London: J. Sewell, 1792), p. xv. Mosley lists both the petitioners and their respective contributions, including: John Ascough, Esq. (£10.10); Thomas Beckford, Esq. (10.10), James Dawkins, Esq. (10.10), Henry Dawkins, Esq. (10.10), Messrs. Drake, Pennant, and Long (21.0), Thomas Fish, Esq. (10.10), Mr. James Fitter (5.5), Cope Freeman (10.10), John Gibbon (10.10), Mr. John Gregory (5.5.), Capt. John Hiscox (10.10), Mr. Henry Lang & Co. (5.5), James Lawes, Esq. (10.10), John Lewis, Esq. (10.10), Mrs. Susannah Lowe (10.10), Samuel Long, Esq. (10.10), Charles Long, Esq. (10.10), Messrs. Mayleigh and Gale (10.10), Valen. Mumbee, Esq. (10.10), Favele Peeke, Esq. (10.10), Capt. George Wane (5.5), for a total petition pledge of £220.10.

[3] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Coffee Planters and Coffee Slaves in the Antilles: The Impact of a Secondary Crop," in Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (eds.), *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1993), pp. 124-125.

mountainous interior unsuitable for cane cultivation, that coffee found fertile ground in the British Empire.[4]

A “Petition of Several Planters…of Jamaica,” written in reaction to Lawes' experimentation, appeared before the House of Commons on March 2, 1731 which immediately formed a committee to explore the matter further. Members included both a former and future governor of Jamaica, as well as Martin Bladen, an outspoken supporter of West Indian interests. But it also included men less inclined to uncritically support the initiative, such as Micajah Perry and John Baynard, both of whom would oppose the Molasses Act, intended to protect British planters by taxing molasses, sugar, and rum imported from non-British colonies into North America just two years later. In this instance, however, Perry and Baynard aligned themselves with the West India lobby and supported a reduction in Caribbean coffee duties, perhaps motivated in part by the opportunity to undermine the East India Company, sole purveyor of coffee from the East Indies and whose monopoly on Asian trade both men had sought to overturn just the year before.[5]

Proponents offered several reasons for encouraging coffee production, but first and foremost was its low threshold for entry. Coffee cultivation was perfect for “the poorer sort of people, whose stocks and plantations are small.” James Laws, one of the twenty-one planters to sign the Jamaican petition and who accompanied it to London, elaborated on just which poorer sort were most desirable and why. “At present,” he noted, the island was “very thinly inhabited by white people.” Such ideas must be understood within the larger context of British strategies of colonial expansion and imperial competition, as both shaped how advocates sought their support. Laws appealed to one of legislators' central fears about West Indian settlement. Nearly 44,000 whites lived in the British Caribbean in 1650, representing over three quarters of the islands' population. But by 1700 that percentage had dropped to twenty per cent, and was only fourteen per cent—or 37,000 whites—the year Jamaica's planters pled their case. Such demographic changes caused serious concern, and Britain tried of variety of means, including

---

[4] James Douglas, *Arbor Yemensis fructum cofè ferens: or a description and history of the coffee tree* (London: Thomas Woodward, 1727), pp. 20-21.

[5] The Molasses Act of March 1733 (6 Geo II. c. 13) imposed a tax of six pence per gallon on imports of molasses from non-British colonies. Parliament created the act largely at the behest of British plantation owners in the British West Indies. The Act was not passed for the purpose of raising revenue, but rather to regulate trade by making British products cheaper than those from the French West Indies; see also, Simon D. Smith, “Sugar's Poor Relation: Coffee Planting in the British West Indies, 1720-1833,” in Gad Heuman and James Walvin (eds.), *The Slavery Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 175-177.

lands grants, free passage, and gifts of start-up capital, to reverse the trend. When incentives made little headway, Jamaica's House of Assembly passed a "deficiency law" requiring plantation owners to employ at least one white worker for each thirty enslaved people they owned or face a fine, but this proved similarly ineffective. In fact, in his multi-volume history of the British West Indies, Bryan Edwards suggested that payment of such fines became "so productive a source of revenue, that the bill is now considered one of the annual supply bills" in Jamaica. The income it generated surpassed that of slave import taxes and rum sales combined.[6]

Coffee offered an alternative to outright gifts or punitive action, attracting a different set of investors with its more modest demands of land, labor, and equipment. It also afforded an opportunity to challenge Dutch and French experiments in the industry. Indeed, when a Parliamentary member asked if the Dutch did not already produce coffee in Surinam, Laws responded that they did, "and that 200,000 weight had been imported from thence to Holland," but as quickly assured the House that "it was not so good."[7]

The Jamaicans' appeal combined what at times seem like admittedly contradictory ideas, but such a broad-based approach was not atypical in the promotion of fledgling industries. Coffee was popular, and so would prove profitable, but also "very precarious" and "subject to be destroyed by vermin." Rather than a liability, however, Lawes argued that the latter only expanded the economic potential of coffee as "several poor persons" could be employed to "watch and preserve the same" by keeping the rats at bay. Coffee also complemented sugar because it thrived on the steep inclines and rugged terrain that Britain's leading West Indian export could not tolerate. It might, he intimated, even prove a stepping stone to upwardly mobile colonists, "as the poor people get money by the produce of coffee they will be encouraged to erect sugar-works."[8] But such notions clearly blended reality with fantasy. While some coffee planters did ultimately transition into the upper echelons of plantocracy, many more remained

---

[6] *Journals of the House of Commons*, vol. 21 (London: Reprinted by the Order of the House of Commons, 1803), pp. 845-46; Smith, "Sugar's Poor Relation," p. 177-178; Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica, or survey of the Antient and Modern State of the Island*, 3 vol. (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), 1:386; and Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (London: Printed for John Stockdale, 1801), pp. 276-78. Edwards estimates that deficiency law revenue to be £24,000 in 1788; slave imports generated £6,000 and rum sales another £14,000.

[7] *Journals of the House of Commons*, pp. 845-46; "Petition of Several Planters….of Jamaica, 2 March 1731," reprinted in F. R. Augier and Shirley C. Gordon, *Sources of West Indian History* (London: Longman, 1962), p. 62.

[8] *Journals of the House of Commons,* 21: 846-47.

small or middling cultivators. Moreover, very few "poor whites" beat vermin away from coffee plants—that job was reserved for the enslaved, about whom Laws said nothing on the House floor in 1731 although the West Indian plantation complex was by that time already deeply interwoven with chattel bondage.

If protective legislation provided one kind of incentive for would-be coffee farmers, prescriptive literature offered another. Planters' manuals focused primarily on practical concerns, but in between advice about acreage, labor force management and crop yield, authors also appealed to the hopes and dreams of potential investors. As often as possible, authors tied agricultural and financial success to notions of order and control. John Lowndes, who wrote about coffee planting in Dominica, argued that "neatness in Plantership is, as in everything else, a very desirable object," as "symmetry and regularity contribute to increase of revenue." Similar advice appears in Henry Bolingbroke's description of Demerara and Captain Stedman's account of Suriname. Bolingbroke described a "dwelling house—an elegant brick mansion" on the coffee plantation he visited, which "stood in the midst of a garden, which the occupier took the greatest delight in; even the Negro cottages were built on brick foundations, neatly boarded and covered with shingles." Stedman emphasized what he saw as essential connections between organization, simplicity, and profitability. A coffee farm should be "elegant, as well as perfectly regular," he wrote, "convenient, as having everything at hand and under the planter's own inspection." A plantation house occupies the bottom center of the sketch accompanying Stedman's text, flanked by kitchen gardens, pasture lands for horses and sheep, and only beyond those the "Negro gardens" and platforms used to dry coffee before packing it for shipment. The coffee trees themselves appear almost as an afterthought, sketched along three sides of the image to symbolize the groves of trees beyond the page borders.

Source: Frontispiece, John Lowndes, *The Coffee Planter, or an essay on the Cultivation and Manufacturing of that Article of West India Produce* (London: C. Lowndes, 1807). The main house faces the viewer, with four windows on the second floor and a porch beneath. To the left stand a warehouse to store processed beans and, in the foreground, a wheel-driven mill. The level area between buildings is the drying bed, or barbecue.

Such accounts catered to the dreams of aspiring men eager to carve out a prosperous enterprise in rugged, but hopefully fertile, mountain terrain. But this repeated emphasis on regularity and order also evinced both the desire to domesticate an unfamiliar environment and need to control a potentially dangerous reality of the industry, the overwhelming demographic disparity that placed coffee's planters close to their enslaved workers. Lady Maria Nugent, wife

to Jamaica's governor who kept a diary of her time on the island between 1801 and 1806, provides a sense of just how cramped quarters might have been in her description of "Mr. Sheriff's coffee estate." At first, Nugent repeats the same sorts of images found in most planters' manuals: "The house is a good one, quite new, and every thing neat about it. It is situated in the midst of mountains, out of which issue abundant streams of water." But after darkness fell her opinion changed: "In the evening the house is very damp and cold, owing to the numerous streams that run about it." And more than just the temperature gave her pause for thought. "A number of Negroes, men, women, and children, running and lying about it, in all parts of it," she noted, "Never in my life did I smell so many."[9]

Such proximity between master and enslaved was all the more alarming given the remote location of most coffee farms, distant from neighboring plantations and further still from urban centers and military outposts which might render support if necessary. Even writers of prescriptive literature—clear proponents of the industry—could not entirely ignore such potential problems. The frontispiece of Lowndes' volume depicts the owner's house and principal farm buildings encased behind walls, and Stedman specifically stressed the need to control access. The whole estate, he noted, should be "surrounded by a broad canal, which by floodgates lets in the water, fresh from the river, besides a draw-bridge, and which during the night cuts off all communication from without."[10]

How such models compared to reality is more difficult to assess as documentation about early coffee plantations is understandably spotty. Few coffee farmers lived abroad and so had no reason to correspond with overseers and attorneys, an evidentiary source so crucial to historians' understanding of sugar cultivation. Likewise, coffee planters rarely held positions of local authority, and so their opinions and political preferences only occasionally appear in the minutes and votes of local assemblies and councils. And because coffee farmers came, on the whole, from less affluent families, their personal and professional papers are less likely to have been preserved in colonial and metropolitan archives. But what has survived demonstrates that at

[9] Maria Nugent and Frank Cundall, *Lady Maria Nugent's Journal: Jamaica One Hundred Years Ago* (London: Published for the Institute of Jamaica by Adam and Charles Black, 1907), p. 103.

[10] John Lowndes, *The Coffee Planter, or an essay on the Cultivation and Manufacturing of that Article of West India Produce* (London: C. Lowndes, 1807), pp. 19-20; Henry Bolingbroke, *A Voyage to the Demerary, containing a statistical accounts of the settlements there* (Philadelphia: M. Cary, 1816), pp. 116-117; Capt. J.G. Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 2 vol. (London: J. Johnson and T. Payne, 1796), 2: 354.

least some of Parliament's hopes were realized. Coffee production did encourage migration of more middling whites to the Caribbean as well as the establishment of more small farms. And in such places absentee owners proved the exception rather than rule—not because coffee planters had any special attachment to either their industry or colony, but because their income rarely afforded them otherwise. Moreover, coffee holdings were decidedly more modest in both size and expense. Edward Long, a wealthy planter and later lieutenant governor of Jamaica, suggested that one 100 acres, "which require not more than the same number of Negroes, would yield equal profit annually." One advertisement appearing in the *Kingston Journal* in 1760 was much smaller still, listing for sale a property of only twenty-four acres divided between "four acres in Ginger, three in Coffee, and Twelve in Provisions."[11]

Notwithstanding legislative encouragement, British coffee cultivation lagged behind that of Holland and France until the acquisition of Dominica, St. Vincent, and Grenada at the end of the Seven Years War. These territories were tiny—the largest, Dominica, was less than 300 square miles—but each entered the British Empire with extensive coffee cultivations intact. "There are above two hundred coffee plantations," wrote Thomas Atwood, Chief Judge in Dominica, "and the coffee produced in this island is esteemed superior to that of most others in the West Indies."[12] All together, the Ceded Islands exported 3.3 million pounds of coffee to London, or over nine-tenths of all British West Indian coffee produced between 1763 and 1774.[13] More importantly, the addition decidedly shifted the balance of Britain's coffee trade from east to west. East Indian imports accounted for 97 percent of Britain's coffee imports between 1749 and 1751, but dropped to 5 percent by 1774, while West Indian coffee rose just as dramatically, from 3 percent to 94 percent over the same period. And almost all of this coffee came from small enterprises. A 1772 report on the British Caribbean colony of Grenada, conducted nine years after the island was ceded to the British by the Treaty of Paris, estimated that nearly 80 per cent of all coffee plantations were under 200 acres, and more than half were less than 100

[11] Long, *History of Jamaica*, p. 407; *Kingston Journal* (Nov. 29, 1760), p. 2.
[12] Thomas Atwood, *The History of the Island of Dominica: Containing A Description of its Situation, Extent, Climate, Mountains, Rivers, Natural Productions* (London: J. Johnson, 1791), pp. 81-82.
[13] NA/PRO T 1/515/179-181, "State of the Coffee Trade" and Schumpeter, *English Overseas Trade Statistics,* p. 60. With the addition of the ceded islands, the British West Indies now produced almost ten per cent of the region's total coffee exports. Lowell Ragatz, *Statistics for the Study of British Caribbean Economic History, 1763-1833* (London: Bryan Edwards Press, 1927), 14.

acres.[14] Even these figures are inflated as only a portion of a coffee farm's acreage was planted at any given time—or even suitable for agricultural production at all. Alexandre-Stanislas, a French captain under Count Rochambeau during the American Revolution also known as the Baron de Wimpffen and later stationed in Saint Domingue, recommended the following allocation for a two-hundred-and-fifty-acre estate: fifty acres for meadows and buildings, fifty for provisions, and another fifty as unusable given the variation of mountain terrain, leaving only one hundred acres for the cultivation of coffee trees.[15]

The output of such farms, despite their small size, was collectively impressive. Between 1745 and 1751, coffee exports from Jamaica averaged 37,400 pounds a year; between 1752 and 1756 they rose to 73,940 pounds, and by 1764 had risen to over 250,000 pounds a year.[16] This trend mirrored expansion of the commodity throughout the region. In the French West Indies, Thibault de Chanvalon noted that the price of coffee had risen so high that some cotton and cocoa farmers in Martinique, as well as a few sugar planters, had switched to coffee, and export figures from this one colony more than tripled between the 1733 and 1753. Dominica also showed significant expansion, the number of coffee trees growing from 685,000 in 1743 to 1.4 million in 1749 and 1.6 million in 1753.[17] Most remarkable of all is that these developments relied on marginal rather than munificent planters, and on enslaved labor forces numbering in the dozens rather than the hundreds.

## Coffee's Planters

The more modest means needed to become a coffee planter is a repeated refrain of contemporary observers. Edgar Corrie, a British merchant, estimated that coffee planters could begin a profitable business with as few as ten to twenty slaves and two hundred acres of land.

---

[14] NA/PRO CO 101/19 "State of the Parishes in Grenada;" Committee on Sugar and Coffee Planting, *First Report From the Committee on Sugar and Coffee Planting; Together with the Minutes of Evidence and Appendix* (London: House of Commons, 1848); Appendix 1.

[15] For comparisons to Saint Domingue, see: David Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue and the Shaping of the Slave Labor Force," in Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (eds.), *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1993), pp. 76-77; Alexandre-Stanislas Wimpffen, et al. *A Voyage to Saint Domingo, In the Years 1788, 1789, and 1790* (London: T. Cadell, Jr., and W. Davies, 1797), pp. 319-320.

[16] Rodriquez, *Coffee*, p. 24; Smith, "Sugar's Poor Relation," p. 178; and Kathleen E.A. Monteith, "The Coffee Industry of Jamaica: 1790-1850," (M.Phil. thesis, University of the West Indies, Mona, 1991), especially chapter 1.

[17] Thibault de Chanvalon, *Voyage à la Martinique* (Paris: Cl. J. B. Bauche, 1763), p. 17; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital: Dominica in the World Economy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1988), p. 54; Simon, "Sugar's Poor Relation," pp. 177-178.

James Knight, a Jamaican planter writing in 1742, estimated fewer still; "a Poor man with five or six Negroes and a small tract of Land, may, with Industry, be able to support himself and his family."[18] Such holdings, however, were all the more vulnerable to the effects of economic turbulence. Indeed, Pierre Joseph Laborie, a French West Indian coffee planter from Saint Domingue who fled to Jamaica during the Haitian Revolution, specifically cautioned new farmers to scale their expectations accordingly: "Many tradesmen and artificers, who would not fail to make fortunes honestly in their own line, are often ambitious in forming settlements too soon and with scanty funds."[19]

Some coffee farmers hedged their bets by maintaining secondary occupations to ensure a steady income. In his survey of Jamaica plantation records, Simon Smith identified three coffee farms owned by carpenters and another by a coppersmith, each a relatively small operation worked by between 20 and 53 enslaved people. Two additional properties, more modest still, belonged to overseers. These men were principally employed in the management of others' estates, but had purchased small lots in their own names worked by five and thirteen slaves respectively. Some estates were larger; Jacob Stamp, for example, a Kingston merchant, operated a coffee plantation with a labor force of 236 people, but these were much rarer. And not all would-be planters succeeded. William Williams, a carpenter in Jamaica's capital of Spanishtown, returnd to woodworking after only two years as a part-time planter, and advertised his remaining thirteen-year lease on mountain property in St. John Parish in April 1768; it contained "a large Plantain Walk, some young coffee, and a quantity of pasturage in good order."[20]

More details about the scale of coffee cultivation can be gleaned by a subset of twenty-eight inventories recorded in the Jamaican Accounts Produce, or Crop Accounts, documentation kept by the colonial government on behalf of estates overseen by agents on behalf of minors,

---

[18] Edgar Corrie, *Letters on the Subject of the Duties of Coffee* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1808), p. 8; James Knight, *The Natural, Moral, and Political History of Jamaica* 2 vol. (London, 1746), 1:19. Only slightly more manpower was needed to manage the plantation once established. "After the land is cleared, and planted, six or eight Negroes, who are capable of any laborious employment," Knight suggested, "are sufficient to manage 10 or 12 acres, and to raise provisions sufficient for their own existence."

[19] Pierre Joseph Laborie, *The Coffee Planter of Saint Domingo* (London: T. Caldwell and W. Davis, 1791), pp. 14-15.

[20] S.D. Smith, "Coffee and the 'Poorer Sort of People' in Jamaica during the Period of African Enslavement," in Verene A. Shepherd (ed.), *Slavery Without Sugar: Diversity in Caribbean Economy and Society since the 17$^{th}$ Century* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2002), p. 116; *Saint Jago Intelligencer* (April 16, 1768), p. 4.

persons deemed incompetent or in probate.[21] Averages are less useful since plantation outputs ranged from 200 to 53,000 pounds of coffee a year and labor forces from 1 to 48 enslaved people, but such information can help create a composite economic profile as well as patterns of owner residency. Twenty-six of the Accounts Produce properties included significant income from sources other than coffee, most often livestock and pasturage, pimento (allspice) cultivation, "jobbing" (the lease of enslaved labor), or property rental; in only two instances did coffee planters participate in sugar or rum production.[22] And while remote ownership was commonplace in the sugar sector, Accounts Produce records also help confirm that coffee planters were far more likely to live on their properties. No owners in this sample were absentee, and a 1799 report estimated that over ninety per cent of Jamaica's coffee planters lived on the island. By comparison, thirty per cent of Jamaica's sugar estate owners lived abroad in 1775, and eighty per cent did so by 1790.[23]

Just over half of the Accounts Produce inventories came from estates in probate following an owner's death. Whenever possible, these records were matched with probate inventories that offer even more detail about how owners divided their capital between labor, housewares, livestock, and loans or debts, thus permitting some analysis of coffee planters' investment choices.[24] The largest estate exceeded £10,000 but the average value was closer to £5,000, which—while undoubtedly a significant sum in the eighteenth century—came nowhere near the more than £40,000 some contemporaries estimated was needed to establish a sugar plantation.[25]

---

[21] Accounts Produce/Crop Accounts (Jamaica Archives, Spanish Town, Jamaica, #1B/11/4, hereafter JA). The "Act for preventing frauds and breaches of trust by attorneys or agents of persons absent from this Island; and by trustees, guardians, executors, and administrators acting for and on behalf of minors and others" was first passed in 1740 (13 Geo. II c9, 1740); it lapsed in 1744, but was renewed in 1751 (24 Geo. II c19, s7).

[22] Higman estimates that 176 of 204, or 85 per cent, of coffee plantations were mono-cultural in 1832. In the earlier pre-1790 sample the figures are reversed, all but 2, or 77 per cent, had important secondary economic activities. *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica,* 13.

[23] Monteith, "Coffee Industry," p. 86; Richard Sheridan, "From Chattel to Wage Slavery in Jamaica, 1740-1860," *Slavery and Abolition* 14 (1993): 13-24.

[24] Since name duplication was common—at least fourteen William Smiths appeared in the Accounts Produce between 1792 and 1813, for example—probate inventories had to include the same name, occupation, parish of residence, and approximate years of operation as a coffee plantation listed one of two other documentary sources for inclusion in this sample set: House of Assembly petitions for special privileges from free colored coffee planters; or contemporary printed sources, such as almanacs. The end result is a sample of twenty-eight probate inventories between 1762 and 1800. Probate Inventories,(JA, #1B/11/3. libers 56, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 68, 69, 70, 72, 73, 74, 75, 77, 78, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 89, 90, 91, 93, 95).

[25] John Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1823), p. 112.

These same inventories also reveal the industry's unwavering dependence on slavery. While other expenditures fluctuated, the relative investment in enslaved labor consistently accounted for almost half—and frequently more—of an estate's total value. James Gillespie, for example, owned a coffee farm of 138 acres, forty of which were planted in coffee. Twenty-five of these acres were listed as "mature coffee" and the balance as "young coffee," reflecting planters' tendency to shift to a new patch of land when another wore out.[26] Gillespie also owned eighteen men and sixteen women and children who, along with the estimated value of their housing, provision grounds, and income from jobbing, comprised over forty per cent of Gillespie's net worth. Other details of this particular inventory provide a rare glimpse inside the farm's slave quarters. The probate inventory included eight "negro houses," each valued at £15. While inventory takers did not list enslaved people by occupation in this instance, making it difficult to know how many enslaved people might have been domestics and thus lived in Gillespie's house, at least one historian estimates that such work was performed by less than four per cent of a coffee farm's laborers. If so, only one or two slaves might have served in this capacity, leaving at least four people sharing each of the farm's slave barracks.[27] Almost all of Gillespie's worth was directly linked to the production of coffee through this investments in labor, land or millworks. Only his income from jobbing, 23,000 pounds of ginger, and household furnishings were otherwise—these last valued at a mere £10, indicating a very modestly furnished home, no doubt reflecting his bachelor status.

*Table 2.1: John Gillespie's Coffee Plantation, St. George Parish, Jamaica, 1797*

| PLANTATION COMPONENT | PRICE PER UNIT | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|
| **(A) LAND VALUES** | | |
| Acres of full-bearing coffee | £80.0.0/acre | £2,000.0.0 |

[26] B.W. Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed: Plantation Maps and Plans of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica Publications Limited, 1988), p. 174; Kathleen E.A. Monteith, "Planting and Processing Techniques on Jamaican Coffee Plantations, during Slavery," in Verene A. Shepherd (ed.), *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives from the Caribbean, Africa and the African Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 117.
[27] James Delle has estimated the number of enslaved workers employed as domestics on coffee plantations at 3.6 per cent in *The Colonial Caribbean: Landscapes of Power in the Plantation System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 89.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Acres of young coffee | 30.0.0/acre | 450.0.0 |
| Acres provisions and negro grounds | 10.0.0/acre | 300.0.0 |
| Acres woodland | 3.0.0/acre | 186.0.0 |
| | SUBTOTAL: | £2,936.0.0 |
| **(B) ENSLAVED LABOR** | | |
| 18 male slaves | £65-115/slave | £1,797.0.0 |
| 13 female and 3 child slaves* | 35-110/slave | 1,145.0.0 |
| | SUBTOTAL: | £2,942.0.0 |
| **(C) BUILDINGS** | | |
| Coffee Mill and Works | | £400.00 |
| Barbeques | | 20.0.0 |
| Negro Houses | 15.0.0/house | 120.0.0 |
| | SUBTOTAL: | £540.0.0 |
| **(D) CROP** | | |
| 15,000 lbs. coffee not cleaned | 4.0.0/cwt. or 112. lb. | £600.0.0 |
| 23,000 lb. ginger | Not listed | 28.15.0 |
| | SUBTOTAL: | £628.15.0 |
| **(E) OTHER** (Debts/Loans due to the Estate) | | £22.15.0 |
| | TOTAL: | £7,069.10.0 |

Source: Probate Inventories, liber 86:222, "James Gillespie." Note: in this inventory children were not listed separately, but as a combined value with their respective mothers.

Admittedly, Accounts Produce properties tended to be larger, more established holdings, but smaller coffee plantations exhibited similar tendencies. Of the five smallest probates inventories available—all under £500—investment in enslaved labor averaged more than fifty percent of the estate's overall worth.[28] Coffee planters, in sum, were less likely to conform to the monocultural plantation model prevalent in sugar cultivation and to instead spread their risk by investing in other agricultural, skilled trade, or professional activities. They remained, however, heavily dependent on the labor of the enslaved.[29]

The same characteristics that appealed to poorer and middling whites, also attracted both non-white and non-male planters to coffee. Susanna Lowe, a daughter of Henry Lowe, physician

[28] Probate Inventories, libers 132:189, 135:69, 149:20, 155:90, 159:158-159.
[29] Smith, "Coffee and 'the Poorer Sort of People'"p. 116-118.

to Kingston's military personnel, was among the original petitioners to Parliament in favor of "An Act for Encouraging the Growth of Coffee" in 1731, and a handful of other women appear as coffee planters throughout the eighteenth-century records. Most, like Lowe, were either daughters or widows of planters.[30] Martha Cole, for example, inherited a coffee plantation and twenty-seven enslaved laborers in St. Ann's Parish, Jamaica, while Eleanor Smith, whose inventory lists her as "gentlewoman," owned thirty-nine slaves and a coffee farm in the island's southern parish of Vere. In addition to the problems and pitfalls with which all planters contended, women faced particular hurdles. Deficiency laws, for example, were particularly "oppressive to white females possessing small properties," noted some members of Jamaica's House of Assembly, "the whole of [which] barely yield a sufficient sum to defray the expence of a white overseer, for whom they would be compelled to maintain a separate establishment on their properties, as it could not reasonably be expected that a female would introduce a single man to reside in the same dwelling with her."[31]

Obstacles for non-white planters were more daunting still, although they were involved in coffee planting almost from its inception on the island. A treaty negotiated between Jamaican authorities and Captain Cudjoe of the Trelawney Maroons in 1738, for example, included coffee as one of the commodities Maroons could produce on the 1,500 acres granted them between "Trelawney Town and the Cockpits;" admittedly, selling their produce at market required notification of the local customs official and a vending license.[32] But most non-whites faced far more intransigent impediments which worked to systemically limit their political and economic standing. In 1711, Jamaica's House of Assembly passed legislation to exclude free people of color from holding public office, serving on juries, or testifying in court. Four years later deficiency laws curtailed the number of free coloreds holding positions of supervision on plantations. While not barred from working as overseers or book keepers, free people of color no longer counted as "white" in calculating the relative number of white to non-white employees. Even free colored plantation owners had to employ whites in proportion to the

---

[30] Moseley, *Treatise Concerning the Properties and Effects of Coffee,* p. xv; Hon. J.W. Fortescue (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series: America and the West Indies, January 1693-May 1696* (London: Mackie & Co., 1908), p. 580.
[31] Edward Braithwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 147.
[32] "Articles of Pacification with the Maroons of Trelawney Town, concluded March 1, 1738" reprinted in *The Proceedings of the Governor and the Assembly of Jamaica in Regard to the Maroon Negroes* (London: John Stockdale, 1796), p. xviii.

enslaved they owned as neither they nor their families could be considered towards compliance. This posed particular problems for small plantation owners—such as those involved in coffee—who more often than not paid the fines, unable to hire a white overseer to work under a resident non-white proprietor. Most damaging of all, however, was the 1761 legislation which restricted the size of estates whites could confer on free people of color to £1,200 sterling, or £2,000 local currency.[33] Such legislation clearly worked to limit the economic opportunity and subsequent social mobility of non-whites in the British Caribbean in all industries, but the ramifications for coffee were among the most extreme. Whereas Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot estimated that free colored planters owned one-third of Saint Domingue's plantation property and a quarter of its enslaved laborers by 1789, building what he described as "significant control of production within growing coffee enclaves" in the island's western and southern parishes, far fewer existed in the British islands. And where they did subsist, such as in formerly French Dominica and Grenada, inheritance limits worked to curb transference of these estates to children or grandchildren.[34]

Legislation was more malleable, however, given sufficient funds and familial connections and some free people of color accumulated properties well in excess of such restrictions. Some did so by applying to the Jamaica Assembly for "the same Rights and Privileges as English subjects, born of white parents."[35] This process, sometimes shorthanded as "special privileges," was admittedly a narrow window of opportunity, limited primarily to the common-law wives and mistresses or sons and daughters of wealthy whites, but if successful the benefits could be substantial. Those legislated as white could count themselves—and in some cases members of their extended family—towards deficiency law requirements, although they were still barred from holding seats in the Jamaica Council or Assembly or voting in elections. The origins of such petitions predated the 1761 inheritance limitations by decades; John Golding, a planter in Vere, had his appeal granted in 1733, while Susanna Augier, a mulatto woman residing in Kingston, received the same in 1738, along with her two children, Mary and Francis.[36] But the

---

[33] "An act to prevent the inconveniences arising from exorbitant grants and devises, made by whites to negroes, and the issues of negroes," found in *The Laws of Jamaica*, 2nd ed., 2 vol. (St. Jago de la Vega: Alexander Aikman, 1802), 2: 23-26; see also, Gad Heuman, *Between Black and White: Race, Politics and Coloreds in Jamaica, 1792-1865* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 6.
[34] Trouillot, "Motion in the System," p. 337.
[35] Heuman, *Between Black and White*, pp. 6-7.
[36] Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica, of General Survey of the Antient and Modern State of that Island,* 3 vol. (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), 2: 320-322; John Golding and Susanna Augier and their petitions for "the same Rights

number of such applicants escalated after the 1740s and in some cases offered free people of color access to substantial holdings, some in the nascent but growing coffee industry.

John Rome, for example, had been one of Jamaica's most important land surveyors, but by the 1790s abandoned his profession in favor of coffee planting in Clarendon parish. At his death in 1797 he left an estate valued at £4,112, including forty-one slaves. Neither the size of his coffee farm nor the proportion invested in enslaved labor was unusual as both are close to average for this time period. But what does set Rome apart was his decision to appoint Dorothy Manning as his sole executrix. Manning was forty-seven when Rome died and well-connected to some of Jamaica's leading families. She was the free mulatto daughter of Edward Manning, a wealthy Kingston merchant and member of both the Jamaica House of Assembly and Council, and Elizabeth Pinnock, a free colored woman with whom Manning had a well-publicized, long-term relationship after, ironically, attempting to divorce his white wife, Elizabeth Manning, for infidelity. Mrs. Manning, in turn, was the sister of Sir Henry Moore, lieutenant governor of Jamaica from 1756 to 1761, and later governor of New York from 1764 until his death in 1769.[37]

While Dorothy Manning did not inherit Rome's property outright her legal standing gave her significant control over its administration, as well as a portion of the estate as compensation for her services. In this case, Rome left Manning two enslaved men and three women. The exact nature of any personal relationship is unfortunately ambiguous, but their economic entanglements continued long after Rome's death. When Manning passed away thirteen years later her probate inventory, also taken in Clarendon parish, included several produce notes and bills still drawn on Rome's estate. She also invested in coffee, although the addition of twenty-six steers, thirty-five head of cattle, and "sundry sheep and horses" indicates that she had expanded into pen-keeping. Given the number of minor debts owed the estate, she also experimented in the extension of credit for small loans. It is difficult to know if the estate she owned was connected to that which she administered as executrix, but whether she expanded Rome's enterprise or founded one of her own it was worth £6,143.18.5 ½--or over £2,000 more

---

and Privileges as English subjects, born of white parents" both appear in the Table of the Acts for volume 1 of *The Laws of Jamaica*; unfortunately, only the names of private acts, rather than the full text of the legislation, is printed in these volumes.

[37] Trevor Burnard, "A Matron in Rank, a Prostitute in Manners," in Verne A. Shepherd (ed.), *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives from the Caribbean, Africa and the African Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 145-46. Dorothy Manning's birth appears in the Kingston Parish Registers, 1722-1825 in the Jamaica Archives, Spanishtown as: "Dorothy MANNING b. 6 Oct 1743 fa. Edward MANNING Esq$^{re}$ mo. Elizabeth PINNOCK mulatto."

than Rome's original property when she died. She left her coffee farm to her sons, something she was empowered to do since in 1783 the Jamaica House of Assembly granted Manning's petition for special privileges on behalf of herself and her children, Thomas and George, thereby ensuring that her family could continue to circumvent Jamaica's inheritance limitations into the next generation.[38]

Johan Casper Weise of Port Royal parish also succeeded in his petition for "special privileges." Weise, the mulatto son of John Weise and Elizabeth Hyne, had been born in Kingston. Little is known about his early life, although his sister, also named Elizabeth, married John Mais in 1800, and both appear in the city's registers as "people of colour." Mais also served as Weise's executor nine years later when the latter passed away leaving a coffee estate valued in at £6,978.[39] At first glance, Weise seems to have been at least as successful as Manning; indeed, his property was worth almost a £1,000 more than hers and his enslaved labor force nearly triple that of her estate--ninety-three enslaved people compared to her thirty-five. But more than a third of Weise's slaves were worth between £10 and £20 each, suggesting more elderly people or children than was typical, often the sign of an estate in decline. The truth, however, was that Weise had begun investing elsewhere and on a much grander scale. While Manning expanded into livestock and small-scale lending, Weise—a free colored planter—was among the few coffee farmers who also invested in sugar, and that estate was worth £10,099 when he died. Weise was still firmly among Jamaica's middling planters, but with combined properties worth £17,077 he was far from its bottom rungs.[40]

But coffee remained, for the most part, a white man's world, and one that expanded annually in the second half of the eighteenth century. By 1773 the Jamaican House of Assembly even offered a premium of £100 to anyone who could produce one hundredweight of coffee, roughly 112 lbs., "the produce of his own land," and three years later still offered such payments,

---

[38] "Inventory of John Rome the Elder" and "Inventory of Dorothy Manning," Probate Inventories liber 86: 23-24 and 116: 162-163. See also: Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed,* p. 31; Betty Wood and Martin Lynn (eds.), *Travel, Trade, and Power in the Atlantic, 1765-1884* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2002), p. 124. "An Act to entitle Dorothy Manning, Thomas Manning, and George Manning, of the Parish of Clarendon, free mulattos, the same rights and privileges with English subjects, under certain restrictions" appeared among the private acts passed in 1783, *The Laws of Jamaica, 1760-1792*, 2nd ed., 2 vol. (St. Jago de la Vega: Alexander Aikman, 1802).

[39] "Johan Casper Weise, 03 Feb 1798 Christening," Jamaica Church of England Parish Register Transcripts, 1664-1880, Registrar General's Department, Spanish Town, FHL microfilm 1291763.

[40] The two inventories for Johan Casper Weise appear in Probate Inventories, libers 111:220-221 (sugar) and 113: 153-54 (coffee).

but also sought to collect more data about best cultivation practices. All samples, an announcement posted by the House in the *Kingston Journal* noted, should include a specimen of "the soil from whence the same was produced."[41] The number of coffee farms in this one colony rose from 150 in 1774 to 607 by 1792, and 686 by 1799. Export values kept pace, growing from two million pounds in 1790 to eleven million pounds just ten years later, and to almost thirty-five million pounds by 1814. Indeed, by the end of the century coffee was grown in every parish on the island, but especially in the eastern parishes of St. Andrew, Port Royal and St. George, and the western parishes of St. Elizabeth and Manchester.[42] As the century drew to a close Benjamin Mosely, who trained as a doctor in London, Leiden and Paris before settling in Kingston, Jamaica and serving as the island's Surgeon General, could confidently declare: "In treating of the salutary advantages, which the public will derive, individually, from the general use of Coffee, it is impossible not to reflect also on the political benefits which will accrue to the Parent State, by increasing its cultivation in her Colonies."[43]

**Coffee's Enslaved**

As coffee plantations multiplied so too did the number of enslaved laborers bound to coffee's production. In Guadeloupe, a quarter of the island's slaves cultivated coffee by the mid-eighteenth century, in Martinique coffee occupied as many slaves as all other secondary crops combined, and in Dominica the number of slaves in coffee production surpassed even those of sugar.[44] It other words, from the second quarter of the eighteenth century on, hundreds of planters in various islands tied their fate to this crop, and they demanded the labor of thousands of enslaved men, women, and children in order to make it profitable. In Jamaica, the number of enslaved people laboring in coffee more than doubled between 1792 and 1832, until they accounted for 14.4 per cent of the island's total slave population.[45]

---

[41] *Kingston Journal and Jamaica Universal Museum* (Oct. 26, 1776), p.4.
[42] Kathleen E.A. Monteith, "The Labour Regimen on Jamaican Coffee Plantations during Slavery," in Kathleen E.A. Monteith and Glen Richards (eds.), *Jamaica in Slavery and Freedom: History, Heritage and Culture (Mona: University of the West Indies Press*, 2002), p. 360.
[43]Moseley, *Treatise Concerning the Property and Effects of Coffee*, p. ii.
[44] Troulliot, "Coffee Planters and Coffee Slaves," p. 125 and B.W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean 1807-1834* (Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 1995), pp. 68-69.
[45] Kathleen E.A. Montieth, "The Coffee Industry in Jamaica, 1790-1850," MPhil Thesis, University of the West Indies, 1991), pp. 15-23.

Most of these men, women, and children labored on modest plantations organized simply and relatively un-hierarchically and located in remote, mountainous regions. Compared to sugar estates, which boasted their own mills and industrial workhouses, "negro villages," and sometimes even internal road systems, coffee farms were middling enterprises at best. In Guadeloupe, the average *caféières* had eighteen slaves, and in nearby Martinique they numbered less than ten. Dominica, with a disproportionately higher percentage of land devoted to coffee by the mid-eighteenth century, still averaged only thirty slaves per coffee plantation when ceded to the British in 1763, while St. Lucia—the eastern Antilles colony with the highest workforce average surveyed—had only a third of enslaved coffee laborers working in units of forty or more. Admittedly, larger colonies like Jamaica and Saint Domingue had some estates with enslaved populations numbering in the hundreds, but the average even in these places remained between fifty and seventy.[46]

The table below compares Jamaican coffee planters' probate inventories from 1760 to 1790 with later listings in the *Jamaica Almanack*, and a *Select Committee Report to Parliament* to trace changes in coffee plantation size over time. The 1811 and 1832 sample sets are significantly larger, compiling data from 303 and 455 coffee plantations respectively and thus reflecting the growth of Jamaica's coffee industry by the early nineteenth century, but the scale of operation remains strikingly consistent with earlier probate inventories. At least three-quarters of the coffee holdings held less than one hundred enslaved workers, and the majority far fewer:

*Table 2.2: Coffee Plantation Slaveholding Patterns, Jamaica, 1760-1832*

| # of Enslaved Workers | 1760-1800 | 1811 | 1832 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **0-50** | 81.2% | 47.9% | **58.7%** |
| **51-100** | 18.8% | 32.0% | **24.6%** |
| **101-200** | -- | 15.5% | **14.5%** |

[46] Trouillot, "Coffee Planters and Coffee Slaves," p. 131; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Motion in the System: Coffee, Color and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue," *Review, A Journal of the Ferdinand Braudel Centre* 5(1982): 346-48; Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue," pp. 76-77; Christian Schnakenbourg, *Historie de l'industrie sucrière en Guadeloupe, XIX$^{e}$-XX$^{e}$ siécles: La crise du système esclavagiste, 1835-1847* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1980), p.22; Higman, *Slave Populations,* p. 434 and 699; Meredith A. John, *The Plantation Slaves of Trinidad, 1783-1816: A Mathematical and Demographic Enquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 117-119.

| **201-300** | -- | 4.0% | **1.5 %** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Over 300** | **--** | **0.7%** | **0.7%** |

Sources: Figures derived from Probate Inventories between 1760 and 1832, housed in the Jamaica Archives, and compared to statistics offered in Kathleen E.A. Monteith, "The Coffee Industry of Jamaica: 1790-1850," (M.Phil. thesis, University of the West Indies, Mona, 1991), p. 48; and Committee on Sugar and Coffee Planting, *First Report From the Committee on Sugar and Coffee Planting; Together with the Minutes of Evidence and Appendix* (London: House of Commons, 1848).

Planters tried to predict their labor needs through mathematical calculations, as they had done for most other West Indian commodities. Each slave was deemed capable of managing an acre and a half of land. An acre could, in turn, yield 300 lbs. of coffee by its second year, 500 lbs. in its third year, and between 600 and 700 lbs. of coffee by its fourth year in cultivation, producing between 22,500 and 73,500 lbs. of coffee beans a year.[47] But what happened on the ground was far less predictable. Several factors from an estate's size, topography or proximity to water, as well as meteorological events from rainfall to hurricanes, shaped production output.

Only the largest coffee plantations approximated the gang style labor system based on near-constant labor for a certain number of hours each day and was prevalent on sugar estates. Instead, coffee labor was structured around tasks. The strongest slaves comprised the first gang, responsible for cleaning land, burning brush, and lining and planting trees. Their work began, six days out of seven, "one hour before daylight" when "the bell and the whip of the driver call out the negroes," when they were equipped either with hoes during weeding season or bags for collecting coffee cherries during harvest time. Sundays were reserved for working provision grounds. The second gang included pregnant women or those who had just given birth, children, and the elderly still deemed fit to work. Even these workers might be pressed into the fields if enough coffee trees had ripened simultaneously, but more often they were assigned lighter duties ranging from weeding to raking drying coffee or picking and sorting dried beans. In fact, some planters specifically recommended reallocating women in advanced stages of pregnancy to "picking or turning coffee on the platforms, or in sewing for the negroes" to prevent the possibility of miscarriage. If a labor force was sufficiently large, teenaged children 6 to 12, formed a third gang—sometimes called a "children's gang"—whose chores included weeding, grass cutting, and livestock and poultry tending.

[47] Braithwaite, *Creole Society in Jamaica*, p. 147; Delle, *The Colonial Caribbean,* p. 72.

Planters' manuals included several recommendations about how to craft an effective labor force. Laborie recommended that "a gang ought to be, as much as possible, composed of the same nation," to ease communication between the enslaved and produce a more unified work effort. He even preferred men and women from particular regions, noting that "to form a gang of young Guinea Negroes is the best choice."[48] But rarely could planters craft their forces with such precision. Often with less money to spend and fewer enslaved laborers to buy, coffee farmers purchased what remained after sugar planters had had their pick. Indeed, some scholars have suggested that sugar planters' preference for enslaved men also forced coffee planters to buy relatively more women, but at least one contemporary source implied that such choices were intentional. While Laborie noted that some strong men are needed at the outset to clear and plant land, the situation changed once coffee trees began producing. "Women," he noted, "who are more handy at delicate work than men, pick considerably more," and so were more frequently deployed in both harvesting ripe cherries and sorting dried beans.[49]

Larger estates also used enslaved labor—almost always men—in certain positions of skill. Carpenters and tillers oversaw building maintenance and roofing, while a mason ensured that basins and drying platforms remained in repair. Mule drivers packed bags of dried and clean coffee for transport, and were among the few enslaved who regularly traveled any distance from their homes. Almost all farms had at least one or two drivers to oversee field production—whether the gang or task method—unless a holding was so small that this role was assumed by the owner himself. "It is commonly and justly said," Laborie wrote, "that Drivers or Commanders are the soul of a plantation," and he expends a fair bit of page space outlining what he qualities he deemed essential:

> They should know how to preserve distance and authority, make themselves acquainted with all that the negroes do or intend to do, chiefly during the night, keep an eye upon the nocturnal visits and excursions; observe, while at work, if any are indisposed, give attention to every thing, and render account of everything to the master…A double share is given to the drivers, if they behaved properly.[50]

The only other position that rivaled that of the driver was the coffee-man, "he who has the care of mills, platforms, and of superintending the manufacture." In this sense, the responsibilities of the coffee-man began where those of the drivers ended, at the transition from harvesting to

---

[48] Laborie, *Coffee Planter of Saint Domingo*, pp. 161 and 175.
[49] *Ibid*., p. 151; Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue," p. 82.
[50] Laborie, *Coffee Planter of Santo Domingo*, p. 165.

processing. Not all of these positions were occupied at the same time, or even at all on some coffee estates. The principal difference between the occupational listings that appear in the probate inventories of coffee and sugar lies in the comparatively narrow range of skilled employments available, resulting in a less hierarchical occupational structure. But if only a few enslaved men escaped the drudgery and tediousness of coffee picking, even fewer women did so. The only skilled positions that women regularly occupied were "Hospital Matron or Doctress," and child or poultry tenders, tasks "usually given to a woman advanced in years, to whom an easy employment must be assigned."[51]

The characteristics of this commodity also indelibly and materially shaped the nature of this enslavement. Those working in coffee lived in cooler, wetter climates, which one eighteenth-century writer thought produced a more "wholesome environment," than that experienced by their enslaved counterparts laboring in sugar rich valleys and coastlines, and consequently lower mortality rates. Other writers, while not consciously making the connection between disease and crowded conditions, nonetheless remarked that coffee plantations often escaped the ravages of smallpox and malaria epidemics. Laborie was more realistic. He recommended higher altitudes, as "the soil is much better on the high than low mountains, the richest plains are those with the most water," but understood that a sound body in the context of a plantation depended on more than biogeography. He frequently warned his readers that the "negro ought not be suffered to want any thing that is necessary to his health and welfare," by which he meant his utility as labor rather than a broader sense of well-being. Nonetheless, he offered detailed descriptions on how to care for the ill, evaluate medical literature, and build and maintain plantation hospitals.[52]

If the enslaved on coffee plantations suffered fewer catastrophic epidemics, however, they were also more likely to be isolated, and that—combined with their smaller numbers—shaped interactions between masters and slaves as well as between the enslaved themselves. Planter manuals like Laborie's suggest a personal relationship between masters and slaves to a degree impossible from absentee sugar planters, at times marked by celebrations and gift giving. On New Year's Day in 1791, for example, Laborie ordered an ox killed and "a vast provision of

---

[51] Smith, "Coffee and the 'Poorer Sort of People," p. 113; Laborie, *Coffee Planter of Santo Domingo*, pp. 166-168.
[52] Laborie, *Coffee Planter of Santo Domingo,* pp. 75, 167, 179-180, and 187-191. On the difficulty of interpreting slave mortality or fertility rates as indicators of health, see Geggus, "Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue," pp. 88-95.

victuals prepared." He further noted that tradition dictated that masters give enslaved workers annual clothing allotmenst on January 1, and accordingly "the clothe is divided into rations, the lots set apart with the hats and jackets." The end result, Laborie concludes, with more than a little self-congratulation, is that "munificence has paved the way to sensitivity and affection."

Such descriptions should be read with caution as other passages from Laborie's treatise suggest that the sequestration which he partly credits for creating a "natural reliance," also resulted in a lack of autonomy. "The negroes in my district never went abroad," he wrote, as "I brought from the Cape all the articles which my negroes desired." Laborie also consciously limited interactions between enslaved people and visitors to the plantation. Peddlers, for instance, were "never permitted to enter into, or to stay, in the negroe houses." And if a pre-existing road passed through a plantation, Laborie recommended building all farm buildings—but especially slave housing—as far away as possible so that a planter might maintain "interior order and discipline of his negroes."[53]

## The Annual Cycle

The first step to establishing any coffee farm was pushing back the forest. The dense timber groves that so fascinated Jamaica's seventeenth-century visitors had disappeared from coastal areas a century later but still thrived in the island's interior, as it did in Dominica, Grenada, and Saint Domingue—any place where West Indian coffee ultimately flourished. Planters' manuals outlined several ways to clear the land. And while some farms could be found at an altitude of 1,000 feet or less, coffee thrives best in cooler climates between 3,000 and 5,000 feet. The biogeographic benefits of such high locations went beyond temperature, "the soil is always deeper and more firm; rain is more frequent; in general the declivity is less; the time of crop is longer, and more convenient; the trees, in short, are more lasting."[54] Some promoted a slash and burn approach, felling larger trees—and, if valuable, selling them as timber—then using controlled burns to clear remaining stumps and brush. Others suggested a less drastic approach. Lowdnes, for example, proposed leaving some natural ground cover between trees to create a natural fertilizer of decaying wood. "Though ashes are a kind of manure," he conceded, "burning could be dispensed with because it destroys of more the salts contained in the soil than

---

[53] *Ibid.,*pp. 178-179 and 137.

[54] Monteith, "Planting and Processing Techniques," p. 114; Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed*, p. 159; Laborie, *Coffee Planter of Santo Domingo*, p. 7. Higman estimates that 92 per cent of Jamaica's coffee plantations were over 1,000 feet above sea level, while 30 per cent were more were above 3,000 feet.

the ashes provide." In part, it depended on the size the estate. Large-scale burning was impractical for new farms "where few negroes are employed; and where every spot must be converted into use." In these cases any room between potentially profitable coffee trees was needed to fill more immediate needs, "a speedy and ample supply of ground provisions, and vegetables of all sorts."[55]

The next order of business was erection of basic structures, including a house for the coffee farm owner and accommodation for the enslaved. If a planter had a little more money, he or she might invest in one mill to wash and pulp coffee to remove its outer casings, a second mill with a grinding wheel to remove the sticky inner parchment, and a platform—also called a barbeque—to dry the processed product in the sun. Images in surviving planters' manuals can be quite elaborate, but the reality was often rudimentary. Buckets and water might suffice for pulping stations on smaller farms, and beans could be wailed by hand to remove their skins and parchments rather than crushed beneath a wheel. Indeed, Laborie estimated that each enslaved laborer needed only a "hoe, a scraper, an axe" as well as "two suits of clothes" and "a store of provisions" at the outset of operations.[56]

Laborie also urged that "personal convenience must be sacrificed," and recommended "the remotest lands" for coffee farming "notwithstanding the trouble and fatigue of climbing mountains."[57] Of course, planters were less often the ones doing the climbing, for once land had been cleared and basic necessities attended to, enslaved laborers prepared fields for planting. Advice manuals recommended evenly spacing trees between six to ten feet apart to avoid both soil depletion and overcrowding once plants matured, but this was admittedly difficult on uneven terrain. Some planters tried to impose order through a process called "lining," in which a strong rope or chain was marked with pieces of colored clothe at regular intervals, each flag designating where a coffee tree might be planted when strung from one proposed end of a grove to the other. Not all coffee farms, however, conformed to this ideal. Baron de Wimpffen noted that smaller coffee holdings planted trees randomly rather than in rows, since "chance, rather than routine, and a very small degree of knowledge have long presided over the cultivation of coffee."[58] But early survey maps suggest that lack of standardization grew more out of necessity—even

---

[55] Lowndes, *The Coffee Planter,* p. 13.
[56] Laborie, *Coffee Planter from Santo Domingo*, p. 15.
[57] *Ibid*., p. 8.
[58] Henry Bolingbroke, *A Voyage to Demerary, 1799-1806* (London, n.p., 1807), p. 115; Wimpffen, *A Voyage to Santo Domingo*, p. 167.

strategy—than ignorance. Drawn in 1791, John Elmslie's plan for Orange Vale Planation in St. George's parish, Jamaica is among the earliest extant maps of a coffee plantation available and includes acreage planted in "old coffee," "newer coffee," and "young coffee." The oldest coffee, just over seven acres, had been planted at only 500 feet, while twenty acres of "newer" coffee was almost 1,000 feet higher. The most recent coffee planted on the estate, however, ten acres of "young coffee," had dropped back down to 500 feet. Such staggered arrangements imply that Elmslie well understood how elevation affected quality, but that he also recognized that highland advantages had to be weighed against ease of access.[59]

Once established, pruning and weeding occupied July through December, and harvesting—including pulping, drying, peeling, winnowing, and "picking" or sorting beans for sale—dominated the remainder of the year. Young trees required constant weeding as roots ran close to the surface and could absorb soil impurities, including acids produced by decaying weeds and other vegetation that would affect quality.[60] This tedious task was done primarily by hand to reduce disturbance and protect the thin topsoil, critical on steep slopes where heavy rains easily led to soil erosion. Even with careful handling, however, coffee fields had a limited lifespan as the crop drew so many nutrients from the soil. The result was that "fields, once productive have gradually been abandoned and are altogether unfit…nor can they be made to yield a grass fit for rearing cattle," which planters tried to mitigate by moving to new ground every few years, explaining the number of inventories listing acreage in old, new, or young coffee.[61] Slaves also pruned coffee trees through a process called "stopping," which involved trimming a tree's tallest braches to reroute nutrients to the rest of the tree. Stopping was done in September, October, and November to mitigate wind damage and bring coffee cherries within picking reach, reducing the tendency to damage trees by "pulling down and bending boughs."[62]

The length of crop time varied significantly between estates and depended largely on how many acres were planted in coffee. In some cases, it lasted only six weeks, while on others it

[59] Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed*, pp. 164-66; Paula Veronica Saunders, "Free and Enslaved African Communities in Buff's Bay, Jamaica: Daily Life, Resistance, and Kinship, 1750-1834," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2004, pp. 55-57.

[60] Lowndes, *The Coffee* Planter, p. 14; and Laborie, *The Coffee Planter of Santo Domingo,* pp. 108, 115, 118.

[61] *Further Proceedings of the Honourable House of Assembly of Jamaica, relative to a bill introduced into the House of Commons for effectually preventing the unlawful importation of slaves* (London: J.M. Richardson and J. Ridgeway, 1816), pp. 99-100.

[62] Laborie, *Coffee Planter of Santo Domingo*, pp. 126, 130-149; Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed*, pp. 171-72.

extended from January to June.[63] The work was meted out as a certain number of acres or pounds of coffee picked per day. Amounts varied based on how many trees an estate contained and the time of year. On Radnor Plantation, located high in Jamaica's Blue Mountains, for example, slaves averaged just over two pounds of picked coffee cherries in early January, but harvested between twelve and sixteen pounds each in March and April, and dropped back to only three pounds by the end of the season in July.[64] Laborie also provided estimates, although not in pounds. "When a bag or hand basket is full," he noted, "it must be emptied in the hamper; and this, when full, carried to the mill." Some planters used mules to move hampers, which Laborie recommended "where the field is at a great distance." If trees ripened at different rates, planters sometimes leased out excess labor to estates with greater need, but such jobbing gangs were not always available. In 1819, John Weymss, the attorney of Hermitage Plantation, wrote his employer that "no jobbing gang could be hired to assist, even at offering so high a price."[65]

Some planters experimented with incentive programs as well as coercion to secure a steady flow of ripe berries. Bryan Edwards encouraged rewards for slaves who consistently picked only ripe cherries and cautioned against relying on the threat of punishment, noting that "it is not provident to urge him on too fast, as probably a great deal of unripe fruit will in that case be mixed in with the ripe."[66] Benjamin M'Mahon, however, who published a memoir about his eighteen years working on various Jamaican plantations, told a different story. A native of Ireland, M'Mahon was hired as a book keeper on Bloxburgh Estate at the age of seventeen, a coffee plantation in the Port Royal Mountains just south of Kingston. At four o'clock each morning, he noted, he arrived at a designated site near the field and called attendance. Any slave absent would be thrown to the ground and flogged by the driver in front of the other slaves. This, M'Mahon stated, "was the general practice through Jamaica."[67]

Once coffee cherries were picked and washed, they ran through a series of hoppers and rollers designed to separate the outer hull from the two coffee beans inside. This was performed

---

[63] Stewart, *State of the Island of Jamaica*, p. 114.
[64] Radnor Coffee Plantation Journal, 1822-1826, MS 180, National Library of Jamaica, Kingston, estimates calculated from entries for January to June 1822; Monteith, "Labour Regimen on Coffee Plantations," pp. 263-64.
[65] Laborie, *Coffee Planter of Saint Domingo*, p. 151; John Weymss, Hermitage Plantation Letterbook, 1819-1824, MS 250, National Library of Jamaica, Kingston, entry for December 7, 1819.
[66] Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 3 vols. (Dublin, 1793), 2:279-280.
[67] Benjamin M'Mahon, *Jamaica Plantership: Eighteen Years Employed in the Planting Line in that Island* (London, Effingham Wilson: J. Matthew Printer. 1839), pp. 17-19.

by a pulper or grater-mill turned either by hand or powered by animals or water.[68] Seeds then soaked in water at least twenty-four hours, were tossed with a hoe to ensure separation of the gum and beans, and finally drained through sieves to remove the white gum residue from coffee seeds, a process called "wailing." Once separated and washed, coffee was moved outdoors to dry in platforms. From this point on, it was essential to keep coffee completely dry. Enslaved men stirred and moved the beans to ensure equal evaporation and prevent mildew or rot. If rain or dew threatened, they moved the beans inside drying huts—small structures erected on the sides of drying platforms—or combed them into piles or holes dug into the middle of each platform and covered them with plantain leaves or tarps.[69]

On-site mills were not practical for some early coffee properties. On smaller farms, coffee was processed by a much more basic and rudimentary practice described by contemporaries as the "in cherries" method in which picked coffee cherries were left to dry intact before beans were removed.[70] While inexpensive and less labor intensive, the "in cherries" process posed other problems. Coffee berries took as much as three times longer to dry in their outer skins and were much more likely to ferment.[71] Planters could also ship coffee to a larger estate nearby for processing and increasingly chose to do so as the eighteenth century progressed.

Dried beans still contained a thin membrane, called parchment, removed by a separate drying process, alternately called "peeling" or "grinding," which involved placing beans in a grinding mill and lightly rolling over them with a wooden wheel. The resultant parchment waste was then removed, or "winnowed," with sturdy woven fans and strained through hand sieves to ensure that only the beans remained. The last stage of processing was "picking," which involved sorting beans into various gradations. Any broken or discolored seeds, called "triage coffee," was set aside for consumption on the estate or for local sale. What remained could finally be weighed and bagged for shipment overseas. These last stages were the least time sensitive as fully processed coffee could be stored for years if kept dry.[72]

---

[68] *Ibid.*, 2:51-53.
[69] Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed*, pp. 161-62.
[70] Laborie, *The Coffee Planter*, 45; P. Browne, *The Civil and Natural History of Jamaica* (London, 1789), 163.
[71] Monteith, "Planting and Processing Techniques," pp. 119-120.
[72] Laborie, Coffee *Planter of Santo Domingo*, p. 58.

Those plantations located near rivers could send their stock to market by boat. Most planters, however, used mules to transport their goods overland.[73] The distance could take days or even weeks through formidable terrain on narrow roads that often abutted sheer precipices. Matthew Smith, who lived near the Jamaican port of Savannah la Mar, could not even afford mules and so used several enslaved men to move his produce. Smith was a marginal planter who shows up in the archival record only because British port officials complained in 1770 that his coffee bags were underweight. Colonial law mandated that coffee be shipped in bags of 112 pounds each while Smith's weighed between 72 and 79 pounds. Smith, however, argued that he could not afford pack animals and that 79 pounds was "as much as a Negro can carry upon his head."[74] It was, undoubtedly, the coffee industry's most demanding task. Thomas Ewbank, who visited Brazilian coffee plantations in the 1850s noted that "The average life of a coffee-carrier does not exceed ten years. In that time the work ruptures and kills them."[75]

While all Jamaican ports exported some coffee, Kingston merchants handled most. Unlike sugar estates, which were located closer to ports and wharves and allowed estates to negotiate directly with ship captains for the export of sugar, molasses, and rum, coffee arrived in much smaller volumes from a larger variety of planters who less often could rely on such personal connections. These more often consigned their goods instead to one of several Kingston merchant firms. But the paper trail first stipulated in 1731 to curtail smuggling helps document these transactions and makes it possible to track its progress across the Atlantic Ocean. Planters had to take an "oath or affirmation" in writing before two justices of the peace "in or near the place where said coffee grew" that what they sold came from only from their plantations in British colonies. A second oath, this time before the collector, comptroller, or naval officer in port certified that any coffee shipped from a colony consisted only of coffee previously described as of British manufacture. Masters of ships had to collect copies of all of these oaths or affirmations and add one of their own that the coffee they transported contained only the coffee for which they had received documentation. The penalty for doing otherwise was forfeiture of

---

[73] *Ibid.,* pp. 51-54. See also *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 121-122. The 1797 volume includes an almost identical account of coffee preparation, including this description of the hand-laborious picking process: "It was afterwards put on a table, where the broken berries, and any filth that may remain among them, are separated by negroes, after while the coffee is fit for sale."

[74] NA/T 1/484/323a-b and 324. Memorial of Stephen Fuller, Esq., Agent of Jamaica, 1770; NA/T1/484/325a-b Letter from Jno. Morse to Stephen Fuller Esq., Agent for Jamaica, 1770.

[75] Thomas Ewbank, *Life in Brazil: Or, a Journal of a Visit to the Land of the Cocoa and the* Palm (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1856), p. 118.

contraband cargo, a £200 fine, and up to twelve months in prison. Finally, once a ship arrived in port, the by then weighty collection of oaths was turned over to the local collector or comptroller who affixed the proper marks to the coffee barrels, lodged the cargo at a designated warehouse, and received 5 shillings for his trouble. While the process seems needlessly complicated now, it helpfully generated an extensive paper trail that documents how coffee wended its way both across the Atlantic and into the harbors of British North America.[76]

[76] Geo. II. C 24, pp. 412-15. Confiscated coffee was divided between the state and the person who revealed the infraction; if discovered during or after shipping, the crown took half and the remainder went to person who brought suit. If discovered in the colonies, a third went to the crown, a third to the whistleblower, and a third to the colonial governor—presumably as incentive to discourage such behavior by other planters under his authority in the future.