Tropical Hospitality, British Masculinity, and Drink in Late Eighteenth-Century Jamaica

Trevor Burnard

Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation, University of Hull, UK
Email: T.G.Burnard@hull.ac.uk

Abstract

White Jamaicans developed a drinking culture that drew on British precedents, but which mutated in the tropics into a form of sociability different from how sociability operated in mid-eighteenth Enlightenment Europe, where civility was a much-aspired-to norm. In this article, I use works by eighteenth-century social commentators on Jamaica – Edward Long and especially J. B. Moreton – to explore how white Jamaicans developed a form of sociability which in Long was praised as showing Jamaicans as a generous and hospitable people but which in Moreton was described, more accurately, as a distinctive and unattractive form of debauchery, oriented around excessive drinking and sexual exploitation of enslaved women and free women of colour. The overwhelming importance of slavery in Jamaica accentuated the trends towards a debauched version of hospitality that stressed white male pleasure over everything else as a central animating value in society.

I

In the years before the American Revolution, Jamaica was the wealthiest and most unequal colony in the British empire. Its white residents are the subject of this article on the peculiar drinking culture developed by the ‘British male abroad’. White planters and overseers formed the backbone of Jamaica’s supervisory staff on its nearly 700 sugar plantations and numerous smaller plantations. Their great wealth enabled them to live far from abstemious lifestyles. Meanwhile, enslaved people of African origins were among the poorest and worst-treated populations in the early modern world.1 This study of how whites drank and caroused while living in the middle of huge deprivation indicates how the monstrousness of Jamaican slave society can be assessed. Just as importantly, the repeated boasts that white Jamaicans made that they were the most hospitable people in the world did not match the sordid reality of how

---


© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press.
that drink-fuelled hospitality was openly accepting of debauched white behaviour. White Jamaicans developed a drinking culture that drew on British precedents that mutated in the tropics into a form of different sociability from the civility of mid-eighteenth Enlightenment Europe.

Social occasions usually involved lots of hard drinking and dancing, an activity whites found exciting. J. B. Moreton, who along with the much better-known Edward Long is used here to investigate Jamaica’s debauched drinking culture, believed that white Jamaicans were so addicted to dancing that if a Creole ‘was languishing on his death bed, I believe the sound of a gumbah or violin would induce him to get up and dance till he killed himself.’ This dancing, however, was closely allied to sexual exploitation. Depictions of fancy dances such as that at the governor’s house in a print entitled ‘A grand Jamaica ball! Or the Creolean hop à la mustee’ show white Jamaican ladies, having presumably learned such steps from the free coloured women who attended ‘mulatto balls’ (hence the sly reference to ‘mustee’ in the title, as if white women had an element of African about them), cavorting in what to European eyes were wildly indecorous ways. They recline ungracefully, drink to excess, and dance with arms and legs splayed in unbecoming ways. The satirist argues that these women’s failure to uphold proper standards of comportment made them ‘charmless’. And he shows in a vignette at the top of the print the ultimate consequence of this loose behaviour: illicit sex. Dancing as prelude to sex was also made explicit by Thomas Thistlewood, who confided in his diary that Jamaicans sprinkled pepper on dance floors because ‘as soon as they begin to warm, it rises and has such an effect upon the women’s thighs, &c that it almost sets them mad and easy to be debauched.’

Drink, dancing, and illicit sex combined to create a milieu in which activities frowned on in Britain, or confined to specific and highly regulated homo-social encounters, were central to white male cultural practices. We could concentrate on dancing, or, as is often done, on sex as an entrée into this alternative culture of the behaviour of the British male abroad in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century tropics. But white male attitudes to drink in Jamaica are an especially capacious way of understanding the development of a tropical male sensibility at odds with a British culture being transformed by evangelicalism (and the abolitionist impulse). The move towards politeness and ‘civilized’ behaviour was not a linear nor uncontested process in which riotous social practices, including those occasioned by copious drinking, were set aside in favour of more decorous ways of behaving by modern refined men. Societies could be ‘modern’ without being polite, as is very evident in the debauched behaviour of white men in precociously modern Jamaica.

---

The model of white Jamaican masculinity was a libertine one—the model increasingly being discarded in Britain as a more modest, religious, and family-oriented paradigm took hold in the lead up to the Victorian age. This libertine model, however, was not a hangover from a less civilized past that declined as modernity increased. Rather, it was a distinctive and successful cultural adaptation to the tropical environment which many white men found appealing.

Key to this analysis is that white men lived in, and took pleasure in living in, an enslaved society, in which drink was one of several ways in which white male enjoyment and entitlement was demonstrated. The overwhelming importance of slavery in Jamaica accentuated a debauched version of hospitality that stressed white male pleasure as a central animating value in society. Numerous historians have emphasized how slavery contributed to changed white manners in Jamaica, their findings enabling a quick sketch of the impact of slavery on sociability. For critics of the West Indies, slavery explained almost every deficiency in the Creole character, from Creoles’ lack of religion to their innate cruelty, their unconcern with the future, and their inconstancy and impetuousness.7 John Fothergill made the link explicit in 1765, declaring that Creoles were enabled by slavery to live lives ‘of Idleness and Extravagance’. Surrounded from birth by ‘dark Attendants’, they quickly become ‘habituated by Precept and Example, to Sensuality, Selfishness, and Despotism’, leading them to pursue ‘Splendour, Dress, Shew, Equipage, everything that could create an Opinion of their Importance … at the Expence of the poor Negroes, who cultivate their Lands’.8 As Simon Gikandi notes, observers remarked that planters seemed incapable of self-control, especially in regulating between the demands of virtue and the opportunities afforded by commerce: ‘Slave masters often seemed caught between the demands of the new polite culture that had evolved in Europe, one that demanded self-restraint and the management of passions as well as the materiality of the plantation system, often driven by greed and opulence and manifested in moral disorder.’9

II

Let us approach this topic through references to drinking and hospitality in the detailed diaries left by Thomas Thistlewood, a British immigrant who became an overseer and small pen-keeper. His diaries are a remarkably frank examination of life in a Jamaica in which over 90 per cent of the population were enslaved people of African descent.10 He himself was abstemious by Jamaican standards, but his accounts of the drunkenness of others shows

---

8 [John Fothergill], Considerations relative to the North American colonies (London, 1765), pp. 40–2.
10 Trevor Burnard, Mastery, tyranny, and desire: Thomas Thistlewood and his slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican world (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004). Thistlewood’s diaries are in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection,
white Jamaicans’ addiction to excess in a society in which people suffered starvation and deprivation. In 1771, aged fifty, he was at the height of his powers, a newly appointed magistrate, a landowner, and an accomplished gardener and scientist. He entertained regularly and profusely. He invited guests to lavish dinners twelve times in 1771, while going out for elaborate dinners even more frequently. Some of these feasts outside his house were official functions, as on 9 April 1771 when at a vestry sitting there was ‘ham, beef steaks, broiled king fish, cheese’, with lots of punch to drink. Thistlewood ate so much that he declared that he was unable to eat a meal later in the day.

When he entertained others, moreover, he was the consummate host. On 2 January 1771, for example, he entertained eight guests with ‘a boiled fowl, with pickled bacon and Greens, a roast turkey cock, Crabs, Watermelon, boiled kidney, beans etc porter, punch, Madeira wine and coffee’. On 17 January 1771, he outdid himself, providing ten guests with ‘roast goose and papah sauce, roast pork and broccoli, roast whistling duck, stewed hogshhead, fryed liver, giblet pie, boiled pudding, bread, cheese, grapes, shaddock, watermelon, oranges, madeira wine, porter, grog and brandy’. Some of this porter was his own: he wrote a lengthy account of his efforts in making porter on 20 July. At the end of the year, he tallied how many animals he had killed for his table, noting thirteen capons, twenty chickens, twenty-two young cocks, one turkey cock, ten squab ducks, five geese, nine pigs, and many land turtles.

The eighteenth-century Jamaican historian Edward Long saw such munificence as a sign of Jamaica’s growing sophistication – white men and white women sharing convivial meals and high-quality drinks at a groaning table. Thistlewood’s dinners in 1771 conform to such an interpretation. Yet some of these dinners tended more to riot than sophistication. Thistlewood gave a lengthy account in 1776, for example, of a boozy dinner of soldiers where ‘the grenadiers treated their officers’. The bill, he noted with amazement, came to over £300; the officers got heartily drunk and destroyed furniture and glasses to the value of £60, and wasted thirty-six bottles of claret at 15 shillings per bottle. The drunk soldiers had many quarrels but were satisfied with the result. Indeed, Thistlewood estimated that, as there were sixty men at the banquet, the damage came to a manageable £5 each.

Excessive drinking did not always have such positive consequences. Thistlewood related on 19 November 1776 how Mr Fisher ‘was in Liquor, as he almost continually is’ and accidentally shot a member of the light infantry. But whites did not suffer much from drunken excesses; the brunt of the suffering was born by enslaved people, especially enslaved women. Thistlewood noted several occasions on which white Jamaicans followed up extensive sessions of drinking by raping enslaved women. On 21 August 1756, he wrote that ‘the white driver [the newly hired] William Nugent was beastly drunk and
wanted to force Rose’. Thistlewood dismissed Nugent ‘for his bad behaviour’. He was forced, however, to accept the misbehaviour of his peers, such as Samuel Say and Stephen Parkinson, who on 26 December 1760 raped enslaved women. Thistlewood was especially powerless when his employer, John Cope, who frequently pursued enslaved women when drunk, raped such women, as on 16 November 1756 when, after dining out and being ‘in Liquor’, he ‘went to the Negroe house and had Little Lydde in Jennys’ house’. The most notorious incidence of drink-fuelled sexual violence was on 2 May 1760 when Cope and Mr McDonald ‘sat drinking for some time’ and then each raped an enslaved woman – McDonald with Eve and Cope with Beck, ‘with whom he was till morning’. The next day Thistlewood also had sex with Eve and watched Cope order the whipping of two women who had refused him before he ended up with Beck. Enslaved people usually put up with such indignities but, in this case, they were so outraged that they informed Cope’s wife what Cope had been up to, leading to an almighty row, in which Cope’s belongings were smashed by his wife.

White Jamaicans connected to each other through this socially divisive drinking culture. We need to remember that it was more than a shared interest in debauchery that brought white men together and that ‘debauchery’ was only a symptom of wider societal cultural dysfunction. Jamaica was an economic powerhouse based on the production of sugar and other tropical crops, as well as having a substantial trade with Spanish America. That economic dynamism was predicated upon the relentless exploitation of enslaved people in a society that Orlando Patterson contends was characterized by especially weak institutions. One advantage of this weak institutional structure, he argues, drawing off my work in earlier contexts, is that white immigrants flocked to Jamaica not just for the chance to get rich in a system in which the interests of enslaved people were constantly relegated in importance, but for the strong possibilities of enjoying the sexual exploitation of enslaved women and ‘the perverse pleasure of dominating black male slaves’.13

Patterson argues further that enslaved people existed in a world of uncertainty where they were always vulnerable to repeated depredations that led to ‘significant slave dehumanization as masters sought, with considerable success, to obliterate slaves’ personal histories’. He terms Jamaica a Hobbesian society, in which planters inflicted upon the enslaved ‘a reign of terror’ and ‘a holocaust’ in an ‘uniquely catastrophic’ slave system in which out of control whites operated with ‘near genocidal cruelty’. He emphasizes that slavery was chaotic because white life was also chaotic, with white Jamaicans ‘screwing themselves stupid . . . smoking too much . . . drinking too much’.14

Drink made the cruelty of whites towards Blacks transparent, uniting whites in a shared understanding that white drunkenness could always be excused.

We can see this unity in a conflict recorded in Thistlewood’s diaries on 20 March 1753. He was roused outside from his meal to deal with two men – Paul Stevens and Thomas Adams – who were ‘both drunk’ and who ‘were going to tear Old Sarah to pieces’ (Old Sarah was later recorded as dying on 16 August 1771, eighteen years after this event). He ‘had a quarrel with them’. But Thistlewood had no hard feelings. On 10 July 1753, Thomas Adams came by in ‘his Troop dress’ and ‘asked pardon for his ill-language he gave one night by Sarah’s gate, with Mr. Paul Stevens, both being almost drunk’. Thistlewood accepted his apology and ‘we parted good friends’. The apology, it should be emphasized, was for the injury done to Thistlewood. There was no mention that the two men were sexual predators thwarted in their ambition to rape a woman, probably a woman in her forties or fifties, thought of as ‘old’.

Old Sarah may not have been so forgiving. She narrowly escaped being raped by two drunken soldiers. Of course, such events happened in Britain as well. Drink-fuelled violence was hardly confined to Jamaica. But the culture of Jamaica – hard-drinking whites who drove the enslaved relentlessly and who always sought to indulge their desires – added a new dimension of harshness to incredibly difficult enslaved lives. Enslaved people took the brunt of the bad behaviour of drunken Englishmen in the tropics.

III

White Jamaicans were hospitable, but they were not polite. Indeed, terms that were used to characterize Jamaican behaviour and attitudes tended towards the antonyms of politeness – debauchery, degeneracy, and libertinism. For patriotic white Jamaicans who were offended by the many aspersions that metropolitan critics made about their character, the answers they gave as to why white Jamaicans acted in appalling and ill-disciplined ways revolved around climate, the malign influence of living in societies full of Africans, the failure of white women to civilize white men away from their inflamed passions, and shameful indifference to religious attendance and religious tenets. They argued that such behaviours were retrogressive throwbacks to a less cultured time, when the exigencies of settling a colony encouraged uncivilized behaviour. Jamaica was moving, in this scenario, through its culture of hospitality into greater conformity with established modes of behaviour in Britain. It was leaving the gross excesses of the past behind.15

My argument does not conform to Norbert Elias’s theory about the civilizing effect of manners over time.16 White Jamaicans, especially men living on plantations, were not moving towards a culture of politeness underwritten by sociability. Instead, they developed cultural forms in which hospitality was a paramount virtue but in which the leavening qualities of gentility as evident in much of Anglo-American society – such as increasing self-control, lessening displays of rage and aggression, and increasing adherence to what

---

might be thought of as bourgeois values – were conspicuously absent. Their cultural leanings – what Doris Garraway usefully defines as ‘libertinism’ in a study of a similar kind of society developing in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue – were a challenge to European norms about what a civilized society should be.  

Order and civilization were increasingly linked in bourgeois Western thought. The modern civilized personality developed from the slow elaboration of rules about conduct that emphasized emotional self-restraint. Violence, excess, and lack of restraint showed backwardness. Thus, it became easy to see slavery – the bulwark of Jamaican social order – as emblematic of anti-modernity, and those who held people in slavery and inflicted violence on them as regressive personality types whose evils needed to be counteracted through humanitarian reform.

Yet much as European abolitionists horrified at planter excess wanted to deny it, the plantation machine in Jamaica and the people who ran it were not antithetical to modernity. The Jamaican planter and merchant class created a flexible and advanced economic system in which modern management techniques were allied to an entrepreneurial and libertarian ethos that appealed to the gentlemanly capitalists moving Britain into a new imperial age. In their indifference to religion and to inherited status, in their obsession with commodifying almost everything, and in their devotion to embracing risk and short-term advantages over long-term planning, Jamaican planters and merchants embodied a cultural outlook that was progressive, even if morally vacuous. That culture was marked by white Jamaicans’ devotion to profit, their antagonism to established European values such as politeness, their exuberant embrace of hedonism and libertinism, and their continual countenancing of violence as a strategy of control. In short, planters anticipated the values and visions of industrial modernity while rejecting the associated values of bourgeois respectability that eventually turned into Victorianism. They did so with enthusiasm. As Sarah Yeh notes, the ‘relaxed morality and the excesses of colonial life might have been a welcome relief to settlers who chafed against religious intolerance, social rigidity, or the restriction of polite British culture’.
What white Jamaicans did, therefore, in their recalibrations of their cultural responses to their social and physical environment in the late eighteenth century was something new in imperial life. As Louis Nelson astutely notes, planters began to embrace their circumstances rather than fitting their environment into British patterns that did not work for them. In doing so, he argues, ‘they formulated a material and social life that stood in stark contrast to the refinement that defined the broader British world’. It might be, as he suggests, that planters ‘divorced from British America and socially and culturally assaulted from the British mainland’ either threw in the towel by moving from the islands to Britain or else finally abandoned ideas that they were Britons who were just inconveniently away from home. Alternatively, as an older scholarship argued, white Jamaicans adopted a Creole culture that fused in interesting ways British, African, and local characteristics. In either way, white Jamaicans pioneered a distinctively imperial and libertine form of cultural orientation, often to the horror of Britons who found what their countrymen did when they went to the tropics abhorrent and un-British. This orientation partook of elements of what critics now call ‘orientalism’ but also drew on aspects of metropolitan culture like libertinism and excessive drinking and married them to a belief that life could be lived differently and more freely in the imperial tropics, like the West Indies, Africa, India, and the Pacific. Central to this tropical mentality was the idea that the tropics was the ‘other’ to the Western norm: things could be done differently there. The culture of drink that was exhibited by white Jamaicans was one manifestation of a form of hospitality not aligned to politeness but which instead welcomed a tropical form of excess for the British male abroad.

IV

The peculiar racial and social structure of eighteenth-century Jamaica bred a remarkably radical egalitarianism among ordinary white men. As the historian Bryan Edwards argued in 1793, there was ‘a marked and predominant character to all the white residents’ in which they demonstrated ‘an independent spirit and a conspicuous display of conscious equality throughout all ranks and conditions’. Edwards contrasted how whites in Jamaica acted towards their superiors with social interactions in Europe, where ‘men in the lower orders of life’
seldom considered themselves to be ‘nearly on a level with the richest’. In Jamaica, by contrast, ‘the poorest white person ... approaches his employer with an extended hand’. As Edwards continued, this white egalitarianism was a function of the ubiquity of slavery in Jamaica and the demographic disproportion between the small white population and the large enslaved majority. Edwards argued that ‘so long therefore as freedom shall be enjoyed exclusively by one race of people, and slavery be the condition of another, contempt and degradation will attach to the colour by which that condition is generally recognised’.25 White egalitarianism had a notable effect on the character of white dealings with each other, even to the extent of changing personality. Poor white men did not cringe or creep when encountering rich men. As Richard Renny wrote in 1807, white Jamaicans’ ‘high spirit of independence’ was evident in their very appearance. Noting that they spoke ‘what they think, without fear or reserve’, he argued that white Jamaicans showed in their demeanour to each other ‘no tremulousness of voice, no cringing tone of submission, no disgraceful flexibility of body [and] no unqualified humbleness of countenance’.

This radical egalitarianism was a logical outcome of Jamaica’s social circumstances, in which white society was dominated by recently arrived white immigrants who suffered from such dreadful demographic prospects that their numbers were always being reduced. These demographic realities made ordinary white men a scarce commodity in an economy which needed them to be involved in managing enslaved people on plantations. White women were few and constraints on white male behaviour were limited. Most importantly, whites were equally dependent on each other for protection from the enslaved. They were equal because the great majority of white men shared a common experience as masters of enslaved people. In short, as I have written previously, the political and social atmosphere of Jamaica in the second half of the eighteenth century ‘exhibited a complex and combustible blend of ostensible equality and demonstrable elements of social deference and hierarchy, all predicated on a fierce and all-encompassing commitment to chattel slavery’. A white man was thus an egalitarian tyrant, ‘determined to defend his own liberties while trampling on the freedoms of blacks’.27 Drink played a considerable role in this radical egalitarianism.

Jamaica’s egalitarianism was underpinned by the importance that white Jamaicans placed upon hospitality. White people of whatever social standing could rely on being treated to food, drink, accommodation, occasionally access to horses for travel, and to Black women for sexual pleasure whenever they demanded it at the houses of white colonists. Every commentator noted that whites were famed for their open dispositions, their generosity, and their eagerness to entertain at a moment’s notice. As early as the 1740s, James Knight commended white Jamaicans for their hospitality, asserting that

---


27 Burnard, Mastery, tyranny, and desire, p. 75.
there is not more Hospitality, nor a more generous Freedom shown to Strangers in any Part of the World, for any Person who appears like a Gentleman and behaves himself Well, is Sure of a Welcome to their Houses and the best Entertainment they can Afford . . . [while] Persons of low rank and Condition are as cheerfully received and entertained by their Servants.\(^\text{28}\)

J. B. Moreton, who wrote a manual on Jamaican society for aspiring clerks and slave overseers, claimed that it ‘was quite customary for travelling people to call on each other, though strangers, for refreshment for themselves, servants, and horses, and that too without any ceremony or formality’.\(^\text{29}\)

The custom of hospitality was bounded by gender and especially by race. As Christer Petley notes, acts of hospitality were generally acts of male bonding, focused around excessive drinking, eating, and wenching.\(^\text{30}\) The few white women who lived on the island tended to be excluded from most male gatherings and often themselves did not attend events if they risked encountering the mixed-race mistresses of white men. Maria Nugent, the wife of an early nineteenth-century governor, whose journal provides a wonderful insight into the mores of Jamaican society on the eve of the abolition of the slave trade, noted from her arrival the absence of women from many social gatherings and the casual gender segregation everywhere apparent. It was one of her principal bugbears during her time in Jamaica that she could not find suitable female companionship and that white Jamaicans had not adopted the gendered fashions of dining in Britain where families ate together at mealtimes, where wives were mistresses of the house, and where men and women sat alternately at seats around the dining table.\(^\text{31}\)

Race was a far more fundamental divide. The enslaved were excluded entirely from white cults of hospitality, except in often awkward carnivalesque inversions of social order, such as the nineteenth-century African-Jamaican festival of Jonkonnu.\(^\text{32}\) Free people of colour were also normally left out of white gatherings even though interracial relationships were so common that every ‘unmarried white man and of every class, has his black and brown mistress with whom he lives openly’. Some commentators noted that white women might visit the house of a so-called Jamaican bachelor and ‘partake of his hospitality, fondle his children, and converse with his housekeeper’. But


generally, their mixed-race mistresses withdrew when strangers, especially white women, were present and dined separately. And even though it was an open secret that white men kept mistresses, they tended not to parade their mistresses in public spaces, as that was likely to harm their reputation.33

This cult of hospitality was as peculiar as the society that sustained it. It was connected to currents of sociability that were a marked feature of Anglo-American life in Britain and in British North America. But it was not the same sort of sociability as in these places. Sociability in Anglo-America was ineluctably linked with politeness, which itself can sometimes seem so idiomatic to the eighteenth century that it can be just a slightly vacuous means of referring to a mass of related changes in middle-class behaviour and values that were eventually overturned by the move to Romanticism in the nineteenth century.34 Jamaican hospitality, however, never led into politeness or into modes of behaviour characterized by terms like ‘civility’ or ‘gentility’ or marked by any sort of decorum in behaviour or personal style.35

V

Jamaicans lived active social lives, careering about in kitterines (carriages), according to Moreton, instead of going to church. They were obsessed by dancing and continually indulged in bouts of competitive eating and drinking at communal dinners, either at private houses or after court sessions or military musters. In the countryside, they spent evenings ‘in conversation, smoking and drinking’, where they proved ‘bon vivants’, with ‘even the lowest tradesman drinking wine after dinner, besides rum, or brandy or water in the afternoon’.36 Thistlewood entertained or was entertained constantly. In the first half of 1775, for example, he dined out or invited friends to his house seventy-three times. On these occasions, they feasted on roast beef, seafood, cassava, sweet potatoes, various rich sauces and seasoning, and fruit, accompanied by ‘French Brandy … punch and porter’. Some of these foods were British in origin but many more were derived from Jamaican experience and some, like pepper-pot soup and tum-tum, were of African derivation.37

The problem with their eating and drinking was that little of it was done in moderation. Excess was the theme that commentators harped on about when discussing Jamaican eating, drinking, and gambling habits. The priggish and

35 Gentility differed from hospitality as a means whereby the genteel could make explicit the dividing line between themselves and common people. C. Dallet Hemphill, Bowing to necessities: a history of manners in America, 1620–1860 (New York, NY, 1999), p. 16.
36 Moreton, West India customs and manners, p. 36; Renny, History of Jamaica, pp. 216, 323.
37 Burnard, Mastery, tyranny, and desire, p. 82; Hall, In miserable slavery, pp. 223, 309.
abstemious Lady Nugent tartly declared that white Jamaican men ‘ate like cor-
morants and drank like porpoises’. When she visited the ‘very vulgar, yet
humane’ planter William Mitchell, she noted that his main aim seemed to be ‘to stuff his guests’. Nugent commented that ‘I should think it would be
quite a triumph for him, to hear of a fever or apoplexy, in consequence of
his good cheer.’ Mitchell piled his tables high with ‘loads of all sorts of high,
rich and seasoned things, and really gallons of wine and mixed liquors as
they drink!’ It was all, she concluded, ‘as astonishing as it was disgusting’.
The meals at the house of another Jamaican grandee, Simon Taylor, were
just as offensive to Nugent, being ‘so profuse’ that she felt compelled to list
all the foods and drinks in detail, before admitting that she felt ‘sicker than
usual, at seeing such a profusion of eatables’. She was no more impressed by
Jamaican table manners, noting that at one party everyone, including boys
of fifteen or sixteen, was drunk and that everyone ‘spoke with his mouth full’.

Of course, Nugent was a governor’s wife and people pulled out all the stops
when such dignitaries visited. Taylor mentioned to her after her visit that ‘he
must go home, and be abstemious, after so much feasting’. But overeating
and excessive drinking were common in everyday life. Moreton, always up
for a racy phrase, lamented that Jamaicans ‘in general drink to excess . . .
[and] wreck and train their constitutions’. ‘Grog drinking and smoking segars’,
he lectured his readers, ‘is a baneful and obnoxious practice’, with gluttony
another ‘kindred vice’. Robert Dallas neatly summarized all the vices to
which residents of Jamaica were prone thus: ‘An Englishman, in the torrid
zone, loving a greasy old black woman, indulging his gross appetites, a gentle-
man, a companion in request, self-approving, eating, drinking, sleeping away
his life in solid and substantial happiness.’

What made these gross perversions more glaring was the sharp contrast
between the plenty of the planter’s table and the starved condition of enslaved
people. The enslaved lived at the edge of subsistence and often got very close
to famine. Even in good times, they had an ‘uncertain and limited command of
subsistence’. In the hurricane-tormented years of the 1780s, they faced star-
vation. Hector McNeill recalled in 1788 how, following the great hurricane of
October 1780, he had been horrified by ‘the misery of beholding hundreds of
wretched beings around you, clamouring for food and imploring that assist-
ance which you cannot bestow’. The Assembly of Jamaica declared in 1780
that ‘the sufferings of the poor negroes . . . were extreme’. Yet famine was a
constant, rather than an exception, in the lives of enslaved Jamaican people.
The relentless plantation regime, in which they had to work and feed them-
selves, kept many, such as the sick, the old, or those with large families, on

---

39 Ibid., p. 71.
the edge of destitution and constant hunger.\textsuperscript{43} The contrast between starving enslaved people and over-consuming whites was stark. The one time when enslaved people ate well, and, just as importantly, got to drink and get drunk, was at Christmas, when planters gave their workers ‘treats’, including portions of rum, distributed according to status, with men getting more than women and drivers, and skilled workers more than field hands. The Christmas season, consequently, was the most dangerous time of year for planters as it was the time when rebellion was most likely. It is likely that enslaved people were able to contemplate rebellion at the time because they had full bellies and were perhaps emboldened by drink; it was the one time of the year when food and drink were enough for enslaved people to have the energy to do more than merely survive.\textsuperscript{44}

White consumption was highly visible in a society where most people did not get enough to eat. Every social occasion for white men involved eating, and often hard drinking. For example, after militia reviews, men removed to taverns or great houses to fill their stomachs with drink and food. Elections were other venues of open public over-consumption. As Christer Petley comments, ‘the ‘loyal toasts’ after election days, drunken homosocial private gatherings, and lavish second breakfasts that followed morning militia reviews all reflected the importance of male bonding and white entitlement in a land of slavery.\textsuperscript{45} Metropolitan observers noted this excess and did so disapprovingly. White Jamaicans’ lack of self-control in their pursuit of pleasure – either at the table, in the tavern, on the dance floor, or in the bedroom – all suggested a problematic people who in their unrestrained nature and their hypochondriac tendency to become invalids indicated a deep malaise in the Creole white character.\textsuperscript{46}

\section*{VI}

The most sophisticated exploration of hospitality in Jamaica was undertaken by Edward Long in his ambitious historical sociology of Jamaica written in 1774.\textsuperscript{47} Long covered a vast range of topics in his often-digressive text and was not always internally consistent, but one of his principal themes was that Jamaica was not just a productive place valuable to the empire but also a rapidly improving colony that was increasingly meeting metropolitan standards of public morality and behaviour. He often criticized the islanders, notably condemning white Creole men’s devotion to heedless hedonism and


\textsuperscript{45} Petley, ‘Gluttony, excess, and the fall of the planter class’, p. 88.

\textsuperscript{46} Burnard and Follett, ‘Caribbean slavery’.

their incessant short-termist addiction to immediate fixes rather than long-term planning. Nevertheless, he argued that planters had a host of attractive characteristics, including being notorious for their abundant hospitality to friends and strangers alike and their devotion to ‘gaiety and diversions’. He noted their faults, as well, though he tended to describe such faults as indulgence, sexual excess, and conspicuous consumption as framed within the context of Jamaica’s cult of hospitality.

In their compulsive hospitality, Long concluded, ‘there are no people in this world that exceed the gentlemen of this island in noble and disinterested munificence’. Jamaicans’ hospitality was ‘so unstinted’, he argued, that ‘no men, nor orders of men, in Great Britain, are possessed of more disinterested charity, philanthropy, and clemency than the Creole gentlemen of this island’. They loved excess, especially regarding food and drink, and were unconcerned with limiting their generosity according to the status of the white people they entertained. He noted that Jamaicans ‘have lodging and entertainment always at the service of transient strangers and travellers’. These travellers received much attention: ‘their tables are covered with plenty of good cheer, and they pique themselves on regaling their guests with a profusion of viands’.48

Whereas Long insisted that Jamaica was improving, becoming more Anglicized, and shedding its more disagreeable features, so that eventually it would contain a people who evoked civilized values at every turn, a quite different picture of West Indian hospitality and Jamaican manners emerged in J. B. Moreton’s racy guide to West Indian customs. His book was far less ambitious than Long’s great work, being a romp over Jamaican life designed to describe life on the island to immigrant overseers, whom he derisively and offensively called ‘cowskin heroes’, in honour of their attachment to their whips as a means of disciplining enslaved people. At the end of the book he reversed tack and delivered a series of unconvincing platitudes about the need to follow conventional morality. But before those bromides, his book celebrated the dubious morality that characterized white life in the island. Indeed, it was a subversive tract, ostensibly paying lip service to ideas of moral improvement while highlighting and recommending Jamaica as a place where whites could practise unbridled hedonism.49

For Moreton, Jamaica was a land devoted to pleasure. He assured readers that it was full of people devoted to fun and that the island was an egalitarian paradise where ‘all marks and denominations of people are more friendly, kindly and hospitable than in milder climes’. He purported to find white Jamaicans’ fondness for over-drinking and gluttony sinful, but the ways in which he described these practices suggested that his heart was not in the condemnation. Gambling was another sin he pretended to believe was appalling: ‘it is impossible for men who are fond of gambling to be honest, thus consequently they

49 For a local rebuttal, see Augustus Matthews, The lying hero, or an answer to J.B. Moreton ... (St Kitts, 1793).
must be rogues’. But, again, he was not being honest in this condemnation, as subsequent comments showed. Gambling, he thought, made everyone equal. In Jamaica, gambling was ‘practised to a great and ridiculous extreme’ but had some value as a means of levelling social distinctions because ‘at a gaming table all people are on a footing without any distinctions of persons’. ‘There’, he contended in a vicious anti-Semitic comment, ‘the nobleman divests himself of all honour, and levels with the vilest swinge buckler, there the Christ-murdering Shylock has as much influence as the brave general or violent admiral.’

Moreton laid bare in his frank discussion of the lure of illicit sex for incoming migrants the reality behind Long’s lament that white men were easily seduced by sexually avaricious Black women. He showed that white men in Jamaica were not ardent lovers unable to resist their impulses in a climate that encouraged lack of restraint. They were sexual predators who saw non-white women as sexual targets, justifying their predations with rationalizations that African women were sexually insatiable. White Jamaicans’ much vaunted cult of hospitality was often a cover for tawdry sexual opportunism. It was ‘quite usual’, he asserted, for a Creole gentleman ‘after dinner to send to the field for one of his favourite wenches, who is instantly hurried home and conveyed to his chamber’. ‘Thus,’ he continued, ‘he takes one almost daily in rotation and roves with as much ease and dignity as a plenipotentiary through raptures of delight, and enjoys happiness as he likes it.’ The emphasis here is on white men ‘taking’ sexual licence frequently, openly, and without worrying about consent. Social occasions were less occasions of conspicuous hospitality than sordid drunken debauches, in which the ultimate object was the sexual exploitation of Black women.

VII

The peculiar demography of white society in Jamaica and of life in the ‘torrid zone’, where excessive mortality meant that marriages were short, children were in short supply, and the likelihood of early death was very high, gave an identifiable tropical tone to Jamaican sociability. The hospitality of whites was that of young men in a society where there were few older men and even fewer white women who could provide a check on their proclivities. Not surprisingly, young immigrant men without familial constraints, doing stressful jobs controlling resentful and occasionally dangerous enslaved people, gave vent to their passions and ate too much, drank to excess, and indulged their sexual appetites. These appetites were whetted by accounts such as that written by Moreton, which pictured Jamaica as a land of sexual opportunity and unrestrained debauchery. Long and Moreton stressed in different ways the attractiveness of Jamaica as a site for white male enjoyment. Long was

---

50 Moreton, West India customs and manners, p. 36.
51 Ibid., pp. 174, 178.
52 Ibid., p. 106.
53 Burnard, Mastery, tyranny, and desire, p. 82.
concerned with how Jamaican values cohered with the admirable virtues of the British people. Moreton was interested in catering to the pleasure principle and to the individual benefits that white immigrants obtained from living in Jamaica. His view was both tawdrier and probably more accurate than Long’s paean to the essential goodness of the white male character.

Long was the greater historian, of course, but his explication of the white male Jamaican personality involved a large measure of self-delusion, as seen in his contention that Jamaicans were humane masters and in his resolute refusal to accept that Jamaica was an unhealthy place, where white mortality was so excessive that natural population increase was impossible without very large migration levels. Other observers were not so sanguine about Jamaica’s future prospects. The Reverend William Jones spent a brief but unhappy time in Jamaica in 1778 and was appalled by what he saw of ordinary white male behaviour. He thought that the ‘real History of plantation-vassalage’ saw the youths who came from England to gain a fortune transformed into ‘barbarous . . . devil incarnates’ who became torturers for the pleasure of hearing ‘the groans and cries of negroes’ and then engaged in ‘drunkenness and debauchery’. ‘The life of this refuse of mankind’, he thundered, ‘is no other than a continued Scene of Ignorance, Profaneness, Cruelty, Drunkenness, unbridled Debauchery, & whatever, if there be anything else that may disgrace the nature of brutes.’

Of course, the ‘drunkenness and debauchery’ that so offended Jones was not something unknown in British male culture. Libertine culture was a feature of elite sociability in Georgian Britain, though, as noted above, the move to what Boyd Hilton calls ‘the age of atonement’ in the second quarter of the nineteenth century meant that, increasingly, libertinism was ideologically and politically suspect. Moreover, it is hardly unusual for a clergyman to be against sinful behaviour. In Georgian Britain, even when moralists affected to be shocked by outrageous male behaviour undertaken by rakes, highwaymen, or pirates, the things that these reprobates did tended to be glorified through the very fact of having them condemned as ungentlemanly. Against a culture of politeness in the eighteenth century was counterposed a much racier culture, in which traditional expressions of male behaviour like those common in Jamaica were celebrated. Gambling, whoring, over-consumption, and excessive drinking were central to certain kinds of male identity in Regency Britain, just as much as they had been in Restoration England. Charles Fox and Lord Byron were widely admired despite or perhaps because of their moral derelictions. And advocates of moral reform like William Pitt, Jr and especially the abolitionist leader William Wilberforce were mocked for their priggishness.

and, in Pitt’s case, for his lack of sexual activity with women and for his seeming effeminacy.\textsuperscript{57}

In short, as Judith S. Lewis has argued when looking at gender politics in the late eighteenth century, there were two models of masculinity in contention in Georgian Britain, which in British politics were conveniently personified in the debauched but fascinating Charles Fox and the workaholic ascetic William Pitt, Jr. One model, Lewis suggests, was revealed in hard drinking, womanizing, and sport, while the other model emphasized austerity and independence from sexual appetite – or at least sexual appetite outside marriage (the ideal English gentleman in this scheme could be fecund, but only within marriage).\textsuperscript{58}

The battle was fierce, but the victor was clear: it was the model of masculinity advanced by Pitt, George III, and Wilberforce that prevailed, leading eventually to the repressive Victorian age.\textsuperscript{59} The battle, of course, was not won completely. Libertinism did not disappear but tended to be more circumscribed and put within clear, and highly gendered, boundaries. Kate Davison makes a case for what she calls ‘occasional politeness’ in eighteenth-century male society. She stresses that polite prudence could be waived and looser manners encouraged when men, especially elite men, met in friendly homosocial encounters.\textsuperscript{60} The point, however, is that in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain, the kind of behaviour done openly and without social opprobrium by white Jamaican men in tropical settings was relegated to confined spaces and to clearly defined social occasions which were thought of as being separate from, rather than a constituent part of, normal social relations.

Moreover, the model of masculinity that won out in this contest of masculine styles operated in tandem with changing patterns of elite female sociability. As Lewis, Marilyn Morris, and Elaine Chalus have argued, women in Britain had a growing presence in the public sphere, as well as greater influence in an increasingly important domestic sphere.\textsuperscript{61} In Jamaica, women had no such contestations, see Peter Linebaugh, \textit{Red round globe hot burning: a tale at the crossroads of commons and closure, of love and terror, of race and class, and of Kate and Ned Despard} (Berkeley, CA, 2019).


\textsuperscript{58} Lewis, \textit{Sacred to female patriotism}, pp. 135–42.


\textsuperscript{61} Lewis, \textit{Sacred to female patriotism}, pp. 135–42; Morris, \textit{Sex, money, and personal characteristics}, pp. 20–1; Elaine Chalus, \textit{Elite women in English political life, c. 1754–1790} (Oxford, 2006), ch. 3, passim.
importance in either the public or private spheres. And, as I have argued else-
where, white Jamaicans, as the cartoon villains in the developing abolitionist
campaign of the 1780s, were depicted as being the kind of men that men
and women who rejected traditional models of assertive masculinity found
most appalling.\textsuperscript{62}

The dynamics of developing models of masculinity within cultures of polite-
ness and respectability which marked out late eighteenth-century shifts in
public and private culture played out differently, however, for British males
overseas. Increasingly, there was a gap between what white men overseas
felt they could do and how their actions were viewed at home. This gap in per-
ception about the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in the tropics led to
scandals by the 1780s, when a metropolitan population became both increas-
ingly disturbed by what was being done by white adventurers in the Caribbean
and in India in its name, and horrified by the loose morals and errant sexuality
of nabobs and planters, either in the empire or, worse, at home.

Drink played a part in this turning against the tropics. The levels of drunk-
eness in the tropics were of a different order from those in Britain and had
deleterious effects on white health. That white residents of Jamaica were
debilitated by alcoholic and sexual excess became a standard trope in the
description of West Indians in the 1780s.\textsuperscript{63} But perhaps of more moment
was the ways in which excessive drinking affected Britain’s military capacity,
especially as it embarked on major campaigns against the French within the
Caribbean basin during the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. Troops sent to the Caribbean died in massive numbers from disease rather
than from warfare. The common understanding of why this happened was
that ordinary soldiers were addicted to ‘venery’ and even more to drunken-
ness. It was intemperance that was harming Britain’s geopolitical interests
by destroying the masculine hardiness of its soldiers and sailors – both groups
being addicted, it seemed, to rum drinking.\textsuperscript{64}

Such behaviour, though shocking to prigs and social conservatives at home,
might have been thought by some men to be attractive, especially by the type
of men who were the target audience for Moreton’s racy anecdotes about
white male pleasure in Jamaica. Increasingly, planters responded to metropol-
itan criticism not by denying attacks on their behaviour as unwarranted or by
excusing such behaviour as a natural consequence of life among enslaved peo-
ple but by arguing that the peculiar culture they had created was a rational,
sensible, and desirable response to modernity in the plantation system.
Sarah Yeh perceptively notes that West Indian planters were ‘a disturbingly
extreme version of the new “improving” landlords in rural Britain who cal-
iously hired and fired tenants and labourers according to their needs without

\textsuperscript{62} Innes, ‘Politics and morals’.

\textsuperscript{63} Burnard and Follett, ‘Caribbean slavery’.

\textsuperscript{64} Roger Norman Buckley, \textit{The British army in the West Indies: society and the military in the revolu-
tionary age} (Gainesville, FL, 1988); David Patrick Geggus, \textit{Slavery, war, and revolution: the British occupa-
any sense of obligation or responsibility to those beneath them’.65 They also seemed to be prone to moral delinquency, not just in Jamaica but in Britain, where they were often involved in upper-class sexual scandals. Both the immensely rich Beckford family and the equally wealthy Tharp family were highlighted in the popular press as examples of Caribbean depravity.66 Yet that was just one view and not one necessarily held by all Britons, especially among the modernizing, improving landlords that other Britons found disturbing. Jamaican planters were often admired for their relentlessly modern management strategies. Christer Petley’s sensitive biography of the most successful planter in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Jamaica, Simon Taylor (1740–1813), shows that Jamaican planters could be at the forefront of modern agricultural practices while eschewing any pretension to paternal concern for enslaved people or needing to adhere to European codes of polite sociability.67 West Indian whites had their defenders as well as their detractors.68

VIII

In many ways, ‘drugs were at the heart of empires’.69 So, too, was drink. It bound some people together and excluded others. It also separated out one part of the empire – the respectable part, located in the temperate regions of North America and later Australasia, as well as Britain itself – from another – the tropical empire, where white men customarily behaved outrageously. In the respectable part of empire, as David Hancock has meticulously documented, drink, especially wine and even more so madeira, became a marker of class difference and social decorum. Drink was mainly consumed at home, involved expensive accoutrements and not inconsiderable skill, and could be easily equated with hospitality rituals and with refinement and gentility. Significantly, drinking wine brought men and women together in shared acts of sociability that showed the increasing Anglicization of colonial elites.70

65 Yeh, ‘Colonial identity and revolutionary loyalty’, p. 205.
70 David Hancock, *Oceans of wine: Madeira and the emergence of American trade and taste* (New Haven, CT, 2009), ch. 9, passim.
Decorous drinking was not a feature of life in the West Indies. Indeed, as is revealed in a large oil painting entitled *Sea captains carousing in Surinam* (c. 1755–69), the West Indies was a place outside normal constraints, where drinking led to debauchery. Created by John Greenwood, the painting describes an imaginary event where New England sea captains, all members of a Newport drinking club, were pictured as being gathered together ‘on a spree’ in Surinam, despite not all being there at the same time. That Surinam was chosen as the place where these friends might gather is revealing. The West Indies was a place where drinking to excess was expected and where masculinity was expressed in drunkenness. The captains are portrayed in various states of debauchery, one vomiting, one dancing madly, and several in states of severe inebriation. The only Black people are a diminutive barely clothed male waiter and a half-naked female barmaid. Two men are shown departing, going either to bed or perhaps to other forms of riotous behaviour.\(^71\)

This was a scene that pictured debauchery and degeneration that was typical of white male social life in the tropics. It also reflected a growing feeling in Britain and British North America that the British tropical empire corrupted British bodies and souls through an excess of luxury and nervous stimulation, made worse by over-drinking. The tropics were places where the European body became enervated and Europeans became invalids through excessive ‘venery’ and over-consumption of food and drink. Jamaica was a place of racial decline, characterized by a deterioration in manly vigour and diminishing martial prowess, as seen in alarming mortality rates among soldiers and sailors. The dangers of the tropics were manifested in ill-health and drunkenness. And it seemed to some observers that these tropical characteristics were migrating to the metropolis and being absorbed by the growing urban working class, whose pathogenic habits, Alan Bewell asserts, were increasingly equated with Britain’s colonial subjects.\(^72\)

Indeed, the figure of the Creole in metropolitan discourse was a disturbing one that played at British anxieties about moving people raised in temperate zones to the tropics.\(^73\) Their ‘disturbing capacity for shape-shifting’ undermined a cohesive sense of English nationhood abroad, suggesting, as Carolyn Vellenga Berman puts it, that ‘Englishness itself is disconcerted or discomposed by its Creole shadow’.\(^74\) It was crucial, therefore, that the increasingly denigrated white Creole body – seen as diseased, tyrannical, cartoonishly idle, and slobbish – was considered to be formed solely in the tropics, but British writers had their doubts about whether such bodies could be so physically confined to tropical areas. As Emily Senior argues, ‘while physical disease is located in the body of the white Creole and tied to the Caribbean islands, the

---

\(^71\) Ibid., p. 347.


\(^73\) Senior, *Caribbean and the medical imagination*, ch. 4, passim.

source of the moral corruption is undoubtedly Britain’. It was worrying that British immigrants to Jamaica copied Creole habits, turning healthy British bodies into diseased Creole ones, thus showing the malign effects of the tropics on character and physiognomy.

A propensity for hard drinking (at least among white men: white men were thought of as permanently intoxicated while white women, reputed to abstain from alcohol, were injuring their health by dangerous sobriety) permeated images of the perils of living in tropical climes in Jamaica. A cartoon strip from 1800, 'Johnny Newcome in Jamaica', portrays a recently arrived immigrant who quickly dies from yellow fever but in a brief period when seemingly recovered from illness thinks himself 'seasoned' and thus 'creolizes' himself by smoking a cigar so as to 'puff sickness away'. Significantly, this strip of the cartoon shows Johnny with his feet up on a table of empty glasses, suggesting that acclimatization to Jamaica meant becoming constantly drunk. An even more pointed pictorial summary of the links between drinking, disease, and death is in 'The torrid zone, or blessings of Jamaica' by Abraham James, from 1803. James connects disease, tropical languor, sloth, smoking, and drinking in a rich and complicated aquatint, in which white Jamaicans sit unwittingly on top of an inferno of yellow fever, while a hideous angel drunkenly oversees the lounging and self-indulgent white Jamaicans with a bottle of rum pointedly in hand. It makes an indelible association between disease, drink, licentiousness, and greed in the making of the white Jamaican.

Ideas about the tropics formed in the Caribbean quickly migrated to other tropical regions, notably India. As in Jamaica, Anglo-Indians drank prodigiously and had dramatically low life expectancies, a coincidence that contemporaries did not think was accidental. And, as in Jamaica, planters were especially notorious for how much they drank, and how their drinking was associated with physical and sexual violence towards their Indian workers. Nevertheless, replicating what had happened in Jamaica, drink seemed to be particularly problematic for ordinary white men – 'white subalterns' involved in the control of enslaved people or Indians – or for soldiers stationed in tropical regions. The excessive drinking culture of the lower classes of Europeans in India, as also in Jamaica, provoked a considerable amount of soul-searching in metropolitan Britain, where imperial excesses were an increasing concern.

75 Senior, Caribbean and the medical imagination, p. 130.
76 Fever discourse in the Johnny Newcome cartoons is covered in Candace Ward, Desire and disorder: fevers, fictions, and feeling in English Georgian culture (Lewisburg, PA, 2007). The prints are James Sayers, 'Johnny new-come in the island of Jamaica' (London, 1800), and [Abraham James], 'The torrid zone, or blessings of Jamaica' (London, 1803).
79 Harald Fischer-Tiné, Low and licentious Europeans: race, class, and “white subalternity” in colonial India (New Delhi, 2009).
The drunken debauches of British whites overseas were ‘a very public demonstration that British rule was not inevitably linked with “moral progress”’. In short, the tropical male abroad was a white drunkard and a sexual predator, whose activities undermined the moral purpose of empire in multiple ways.

Acknowledgements. This article forms part of Intoxicants and early modern European globalization: spaces, practices, material culture, a special issue resulting from a workshop series, held in 2017 at the Victoria and Albert Museum and in 2018 at the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

Funding Statement. The workshop series at the Victoria and Albert Museum was funded by the ESRC ‘Intoxicants & Early Modernity Project’.

---

80 Fischer-Tiné, “Drinking habits of our countrymen”, p. 399.

Cite this article: Burnard T (2021). Tropical Hospitality, British Masculinity, and Drink in Late Eighteenth-Century Jamaica. The Historical Journal 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X2100025X