

A 'Wicked' Design: The St Helena Slave Rebellion of 1695

by Stephen A. Royle

When St Helena was taken by the East India Company in 1659 it was uninhabited with just a small chapel and a few huts used by passing seamen who collected water and food, including fruit (think of Lemon Valley) also hunting goats and hogs which had been left at the island. The company sent down a garrison to fortify and protect its new asset and also established a civilian population to produce more secure supplies of food to refresh its ships. The company did not find it easy to attract settlers to this remote spot and right from the start of the occupation intended that slaves would supplement the labour force. Captain John Dutton on the voyage of settlement was instructed to acquire slaves for St Helena from the Cape Verde Islands. Five or six were to be bought, both men and women, “provided they may be had at under 40 dollars”¹—John Company always kept a close eye on the bottom line. The same year of 1659 orders were issued to the company’s agents at Fort Cormantine in West Africa to secure “10 lusty young black men and women and what provisions are reasonable,” which would be collected for St Helena by Captain Swanley in the *Fruroe*.² (‘Lusty’, by the way, meant vigorous, its association with sexual desire alone is a more recent reading of the word). There are records of slaves being brought from Africa, Barbados, Cape Verde and also company holdings in Asia throughout the period, both before and after St Helena’s temporary loss to the Dutch in 1673. For example, when the island was resettled after 1673 several of the households aboard the first two ships sent down included negroes as servants and, additionally, there was a party of “12 Negro company servants”.³ Occasionally slaves would be taken from the ‘Madagascar ships’—slavers taking their human cargo from that island eventually to the Americas—in payment for supplying the ships with food and water at St Helena. In 1684 the company made it clear that they regarded it as “utterly impossible for any European Plantation to thrive between ye Tropicks upon any place without ye

assistance and labour of Negroes.”⁴ This quote and many of the company records do not use the word ‘slaves’, but the Negroes brought to St Helena were slaves, subject to purchase and sale.

Slaves were valuable in the tiny society that was developing on St Helena. This was a pioneering period; there was much work necessary in clearing land for the ‘plantations’ as the farms were called, as well as in operating these holdings. The company held their own slaves, using them on in-house holdings, especially the Company Plantation (where Plantation House is today), at the fort in Jamestown, and to help build the fortifications, which were a major project of the early decades of settlement. A record of the occupations of company slaves at St Helena in 1723 exists amongst the East India Company documents in the British Library and shows that 43 of the company’s then 224 slaves (156 men, 68 women) were based at the fortifications; others worked on company land, at fishing, crewing the longboat or at the lime kilns. Seven were, in a phrase redolent of the American South, ‘house blacks’ at the fort. There were 39 children ‘not yet fit for labour’ and 15 people were described as ‘superannuated’.⁵ Civilians, the ‘planters’, also held slaves. They could be purchased and were very costly, ‘retailing’ (an appropriate if ghastly phrase to use regarding human beings) at £12-14 each in 1684 regarding a party brought in that year by Captain Knox.⁶ For context, the annual salary of the deputy governor on the island at this period was £40. The slaves were usually bought on credit, part of the complicated financial dealings between company and planters; one planter was before the court in 1690 for not keeping up the payments.⁷ Slaves, then, were commodities, possessions to be corralled, treated in a way similar to livestock. In 1673, when the island was returned to company possession after the navy had retaken it from the Dutch, the military commander was instructed to deliver unto the company’s new governor, Captain Field, “the island of St Helena with all the forts, ordnance, ammunition, stores, provisions, cattle, negroes and whatsoever else is upon the said island.”⁸ Negroes came after cattle and shared the non-human ‘whatsoever’.

Slaves were subject to savage treatment. One case involved two who were apprehended out of doors one night in 1692. That in itself was against the law, and their claim they were going fishing was counteracted by the planter Prudence Sherwin, who had caught them

and thought they were going to steal from her plantation. The slaves were questioned, but would not admit that they intended to steal. One was then flogged in order “to extort a true confession”. He so confessed, but “after the punishment had been inflicted upon him, he denied all that he had said, saying he said anything whilst under the lash to prevent further punishment.” The second slave (neither are named) claimed under torture to have been enticed by the other. In case they had been complicit in a planned robbery, Prudence Sherwin’s own slaves were questioned—and flogged—but “nothing being gotten from them”, all the slaves were released.⁹

However, as valuable pieces of property slaves were cared for in some ways. There is evidence of medical attention, of education for the children and they had a possibility unusual for a slave population in British territory in the seventeenth century in that they could be baptised into the Anglican religion (Catholics were not then allowed on St Helena). Slaves were also not without some protection under the law. One case from 1687 relates to Martha Bolton, a widow. A slave belonging to her had died and Bolton was charged with causing that death. Bolton claimed that the slave had absconded and when she returned home was almost starved and that was the cause of death, although it was admitted that the woman had been ‘corrected’ for running away. Two planters, who viewed the body, reported that there were signs of burning on her back but they could not say if this had caused death. Bolton was “strictly admonished”, a somewhat lesser punishment than black people faced for causing injury or death to white people. However, this does not gainsay the fact that Bolton was in court and that her violent actions towards her slave were unlawful as well as unreasonable. The impression of care this conveys for the slave community is weakened by the records not naming the black woman and the case, which also set limits on Bolton’s potential ill-treatment of another slave who was pregnant, throughout referred to the negro women using terms such as ‘it’ and ‘its’.¹⁰

There had never been the slightest expectation even in the minds of the sometimes unrealistically idealistic company men, who tried to control St Helena from London’s Leadenhall Street, that slaves were, to use the modern parlance, stakeholders in a common venture. Slaves were not exhorted to “live together in love and amity”, an instruction that was actually issued to the infant colony in 1670.¹¹

Rather, they were to be controlled by harsh regulations, for they were feared. In 1679 there were “rumours [...] touching the blacks on the Island as if they intended to some rising, tending to the destruction of their masters and all the inhabitants”.¹² After this, slaves were forbidden to gather together even on the day of rest.

There was some cause for suspicion; the court records of St Helena for the period do find a number of slaves guilty of killing their masters. One, Peter, in 1687 was found guilty of attempting to poison his master and mistress by mixing ground glass, blood and sweat in with their meal. During his trial it transpired that he had successfully murdered his former master with a similar recipe, this time mixing earth from graves with the ground glass.¹³ There was another rumoured rebellion in 1693 and then in late 1695 a more serious plot was uncovered.

To summarise the evidence from the extensive court proceedings, it seemed that slaves planned first to capture the fort in Lemon Valley, killing the two soldiers on duty. They would steal the weapons held there, return to their homes where they would slaughter their owners by asking their master to step outside where he would be killed and then rushing into the house to deal with those inside. The slaves would then gather in Chapel Valley where they would take the fort by setting fire to a house that adjoined it and capturing the soldiers when they ran out to deal with the blaze. The fort in their hands, under the leadership of Will (slaves only had one name) acting as governor, they would await the arrival of a ship. The slaves then planned to dress as soldiers and pretend to be the guard of honour when the captain paid his courtesy visit and capture him when he came ashore from the ship's boat. With the captain as hostage, the slaves would be able to seize his ship and sail away to freedom just as had the soldiers who mutinied in 1693, about which the slaves would have known.


The plan would surely have failed. The capture of the ship's captain would be unlikely to have succeeded, he must certainly have observed that the guard of honour were all black men and thus been suspicious. In any event, the plan was never put into operation as it was betrayed by a slave, Annah, who knew Jack, one of the ringleaders, or she might have got the story from another slave in her household, Roger. Annah told her mistress, Mrs Goodwin, who told a man working at her house, John Bowman, who had the story

confirmed by a slave, Fortune, working with him. The governor, Stephen Poirier, was informed; Lemon Valley Fort was emptied of its arms and all the slaves in the island were taken by their owners, backed up by soldiers, to Fort James where they were held.

The council convened; Annah repeated her story and was rewarded with tobacco. Other slaves confirmed her evidence, including Fortune and also Will, putative governor of St Helena, who implicated several others. It might seem strange that slaves would shop their fellows, but it became clear that by no means all approved of the revolt, and such were the divisions in their ranks that "those blacks who would not side with them [the rebels] were to be put to death." Once the plot was revealed, giving evidence, despite being a conspirator like Will, might lead to leniency.

The plot had been in the making since as early as August when the ringleaders started to recruit others by individual word of mouth, given that association was forbidden; thus Will had been recruited by Jack and had himself recruited Roger. This networking was successful in that rebels were brought into the cause, but it also led to the plot being known by those who would not join, a grave danger to the plotters, as was seen when the revolt was revealed by Annah. Some slaves examined knew nothing and were released. Four who had refused to join the plot were flogged for not telling their masters about it.¹⁴ In the end, twelve slaves were found guilty. There was a proposal to execute all of them, but this would have fallen foul of the need to keep slaves alive to work, so only three ringleaders, including Jack and Will (despite his evidence), were executed—horribly of course. One was starved to death in chains, the other two hung, drawn and quartered. The remaining nine were to "receive great punishment, yea even next unto death, for the deterring of others to act in any such wicked design". To bolster this message of deterrence, all slaves were required to attend the punishments, which were carried out in Fort James, each of them having to carry a load of dry wood into the settlement as a "burden".¹⁵

To the planters and to the company, the slaves were a despised and dreaded other to be feared, to be controlled by a regime of strict regulation and harsh punishment. Slaves were subject to a lesser standard of justice and were certainly punished more harshly than white people. Their activities, even in their free time, were strictly

controlled to prevent association for fear they would plot a revolt. Paradoxically, this worrisome population element was of crucial value to St Helena, at the time of the revolt in 1695 there were about 300 slaves on the island, out of a total population then of about 850, and the utter impossibility of a settlement venture such as this thriving without “ye assistance and labour of Negroes” has been recorded. From the voyage of occupation in 1659 the company imported slaves, people who were feared but were needed, hence the considerations after the revolt on how to inflict “punishment, yea even next unto death” yet keep them alive—so they could carry on working. 

References:

- ¹ British Library (BL), IOR/E/3/85, f.94-95v, 11 January 1659.
- ² BL, IOR/E/3/85, f.114v-115, 23 June 1659.
- ³ BL, IOR E/3/88, f.41v-44v.
- ⁴ BL, IOR E/3/90, f.250-51v, 26 November 1684.
- ⁵ BL, G/32/118 no.81, 26 March 1723.
- ⁶ BL, IOR E/3/90, f.250-250v, 26 November 1684.
- ⁷ St Helena Archives (SHA), EIC 1/3, p.177-83, 20 March 1690.
- ⁸ Warrant, 23 December 1673, in Ethel B. Sainsbury (1932) *A Calendar of the Court Minutes etc. of the East India Company, 1671-1673* (Clarendon Press: Oxford), p.303.
- ⁹ SHA, EIC 1/3, p.416-20, 25 July 1692.
- ¹⁰ SHA, EIC 1/2, p.336-39, 15 June 1687.
- ¹¹ BL, IOR E/3/87, f.202v-203, 9 December 1670.
- ¹² SHA, EIC 1/1, p.71-72, 6 November 1679.
- ¹³ SHA, EIC1/2, p.386-90, 24 November 1687.
- ¹⁴ SHA, EIC 1/4, p.237-51, 3 December 1695.
- ¹⁵ SHA, EIC 1/4, p.253-60, 16 December 1695.

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