

What Makes a Woman a Member of the Elite?

Women in Early Colonial Jamaica

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Meaghan G. Peterson

Committee Members:

Dr. Mark Doyle

Dr. Mary Hoffschwelle

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work is for us.

Abstract:

This work is to shine a new light on the elite women living in the British colony of Jamaica in the 1600s and 1700s. I have put this together with sources from the families living there at the time and with secondary sources that are only beginning to cover all of the information that is needed to truly understand these women. My three chapters cover the family obligations, plantation responsibilities, and social lives of these elite British plantation mistresses. The goal here has been to uncover new sources and set the stage for future works to be done on the subject. Women in the Caribbean are still a new subject for historians, but it is important to not focus too heavily on any one group of women, but to gain understanding on all of them, fitting the pieces together until we have a complete picture.

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## Introduction

“When people come to Jamaica, we don't want them to think about the problems of Jamaica. So let them come be in their paradise.”

-Ziggy Marley

This beautiful country does seem like a paradise as you fly over it. It is incredibly lush, an intense green color that stays in your mind long after you leave. Once you get off the plane, though, travelers are separated into two different groups. There are some locals that travel back and forth between the United States or other Caribbean islands for business or family. However, many of those traveling to the island are tourists. They walk through the airport seeing pictures of smiling Jamaicans and hear “One Love” playing over the speaker system. After going through customs, they are shuffled off to buses and cars taking them to the beach resorts, that they will probably not leave until it is time to go back to the airport. Tourists are isolated from what is really Jamaica. They look at the beautiful landscape, but not the cities that run the island; they see the hotel staff, but not the people who live outside the resort.

Starting this work, I wanted to be a tourist. I had heard so much about the Caribbean, and had even been to the Bahamas twice. As an avid lover of British history, I had been trying to find a niche to fit into to pursue, a topic that would spur my interest and still be something I loved. My second trip to the Bahamas got me started. In Nassau, I found that British colonialism had left its mark on the island and did not look to disappear any time soon.

Jamaica, though, held so much promise. It was a large island with a fascinating history. I delved in with much enthusiasm and found that I was not disappointed. There

are many books and works on the natural history of the island, the political history of Jamaica, and hundreds of texts on slaves and slavery, since it was such a large part of the story of Jamaica. Out of slavery comes a vibrant and violent cultural history. There has been a constant back and forth between white and black culture. This has been the focus of Jamaican history for many years now. There is so much more to be done though. I decided that this is where I wanted to concentrate my work. I never looked back and I have never regretted the decision.

After two and a half years of research in the local library, I finally went to Jamaica. Like all the commercials show, the island is beautiful and the people were very friendly. I was very jealous of the tourists that were taken out to private cars and buses, especially when I found myself engulfed in a wave of locals all hailing cabs or meeting family at the airport in Kingston. With my laptop and notebooks and sallow complexion from years of school, I stood out like the proverbial sore thumb. It was worth it though for the privilege of going through a plethora of fascinating documents. At the Jamaican National Archives and the National Library of Jamaica, the archivists and librarians were incredibly friendly and helpful. I was very short on time; there were only four days to go through hundreds of boxes and folders of documents, books, letters, and more. When I came back, though, I found that I had not only gathered some great documentary finds, but that I had also found that the history of Jamaica cannot just be for imperial historians, who view the island as a footnote in the history of the Caribbean as it played a pawn in world affairs between great imperial powers.

Male-centered histories are very prevalent about Jamaica. While men like Oliver Cromwell to Marcus Garvey received prominent attention, very few women make an

appearance in the grand library of Jamaican history. And with such big names, it is easy to see how women can be left out of a history so dominated by men. So who were the white women living in the colonies of Jamaica? There were not a lot of women in the early period of British colonization, but the government was willing to go to great lengths to get women to go, and many took the call and left stable homes to go to the Caribbean. These women came from all walks of life, and with such a small population and so few women, they were able to become socially mobile in a new place. Jamaica was a way for women to move up in the world. They could even own slaves and land, start businesses, or simply marry a wealthy planter or aristocratic officer. Some of these women eventually became the creole upper class and these are the women that have become the focus of this work. Other women, such as the working class and middle class women of the area, made significant impacts, but that is a work that must be saved for a larger research project. There were so many different kinds of women from different places, that they cannot all be contained in one piece. Therefore, it is the intention here to focus on elite women and how they compared with other British imperial ladies to set the ground work for a larger project that will encompass all of the women in Jamaica.

In order to have a complete history, all facets of a culture must be discussed. This is where I stopped and took a step back. After months of research, I knew a great deal about the political history of the island. I knew even more about slavery and missionaries and sugar. But one question came to my mind, like a light bulb that is turned on in a dark room. Where are the women? What happened to the histories of women in Jamaica? As stated previously, studies about the Caribbean, particularly the British islands, fit into so many categories, including political, imperial and cultural

history. A complete gendered history, though, is still in the works. The focus here is to bring together all of these genres and remind historians that gender can be a part of them, without becoming the all-consuming monster that many historians believe that it is. Gender is “a useful category of historical analysis,”<sup>1</sup> and should be used as such. We cannot escape the ideas that Joan Scott and others like her have placed before us. It is important to recognize that gender is a not just a part or facet of history. It is the rhythm behind and running through all histories, and an idea that I hope to continue here.

Both men and women played integral roles in the creation of society in Jamaica. The goal here is to create a work that recognizes and begins to plumb the depths of the women's role. In that way, we will create a more gendered view of the history of Jamaica, and not just one that fits into the ones we usually see mentioned above: the political, imperial, and cultural.

#### The Elite Women of Jamaica

At one time, Jamaica had its own native population. The Arawaks were the natives that the Spanish came into contact with when they first arrived on the island, but after they were nearly all wiped out, who was left? The Spanish came in and began to build a civilization, and by the early sixteenth century, when it was passed over to the British, a plantation society was already in place. Since the native population was gone, and Europeans would not work in the sugar fields, African slaves were brought in. From here, the elite British land owners that came to Jamaica created their own vision of a Caribbean paradise. They built homes, farms, and made the towns bigger and more

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1 For a more in-depth analysis of gender and history, see Joan Scott's seminal work, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (Dec. 1986): 1053-1075.



exciting places to visit. When the first British elite women arrived, they knew that they were not at home in Europe, so they did the best they could in their circumstances to create a society of grace and fashion.

This work focuses on the early colonial period of Jamaica, just after the Spanish left. The colonial period usually dates from the late 1600s until the abolition of slavery in 1838. Although Jamaica remained an official colony until 1962, when most people consider the colonial period, they think of the initial colonization and the rise and height of the sugar planter class. It is during this time that saw the rise of the plantation economy, and the mistresses that came with the plantation class system. These elite women, also known as the planter class ladies, became the backbone of society on the two islands. They were the ones who determined who moved up the social ladder, the social events of the season, the trends of the day, and the attitudes and manners of people from all walks of life in the British Caribbean. Through them, I believe, we can see how being a British subject in an island far from “home” was different from being an elite woman in the already established society. Instead of having large groups of friends relatively close by, some women in Jamaica went months without seeing someone that they felt matched their peer level. Women in Great Britain also did not have to deal with malaria and heat strokes and attacks from foreign powers. Women in Great Britain had what they needed usually within a day's ride to the nearest town, while their counterparts in Jamaica could wait months for a ship to bring them the things they deemed necessary. The experiences of the elite women of Jamaica can help form an even broader picture of the early period of British imperialism. By using these women, and comparing them to similar women in other British holdings, like the British colonies in America and, later,

India, I believe a new picture of the effects of imperialism will begin to appear.

“Sorrow has indeed been our portion: since I came to Jamaica I have known what it is – I never did before.”<sup>2</sup>

-Ann Brodbelt

All of the women that came to Jamaica experienced the depths of sadness, for the island was a very difficult place to live. The climate was drastically different from Europe, making heat exhaustion and tropical diseases like malaria and yellow fever a constant threat. And it was a far more dangerous place to live than England, with invasions and slave revolts worrying every white person on the island, particularly the women.<sup>3</sup> One woman wrote that “We are in daily expectation of some Protection from England...however, were those Wretches to attempt an Invasion I flatter myself they would meet with a reception not altogether satisfactory.”<sup>4</sup> Elite women in Jamaica constantly feared death, even in their palatial plantation homes. Until the twentieth century, Jamaica was not a playground for people wanting to go on vacation; it was a difficult and brutal place to live. The island's fevers and other dangers quickly ended many lives of those who braved the journey in hopes of wealth during the colonial period.<sup>5</sup>

The lives of the elite women in Jamaica in some ways mirrored the lives of elite colonial women in other parts of the British empire too. Women in colonial North America and British India had to fight many of the same battles against disease and boredom. Some may wonder why it is so important to bring in women from very

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2 Ann Brodbelt, pg. 128.

3 Mair 15.

4 Brodbelt, pg. 58.

5 Mair, 15.

different colonies. Like hanging a mirror, though, there is the possibility that the reflection may add even more insight into the lives of Jamaican elite women. After years of research, I believe that this is more than a possibility, and that is why I have brought out the words of Eliza Lucas, born on the island of Antigua and raised in the colony of South Carolina, near Charleston and the works of researchers like Piya Chatterjee, who focused on Indian tea plantations, to bring out a more complete picture of the Jamaican women.<sup>6</sup>

#### Previous Foundational Works

The historiography of these women, while not overly extensive, does exist. The earliest works on Jamaica were mostly natural histories, explaining the flora, fauna, and climate of the island. Richard Ligon was one of the first authors who published books on the Caribbean and his book, while based on Barbados, mentioned Jamaica several times and served almost as a travel brochure to get more English settlers to come to the area. That was 1657, though, and the histories of Jamaica have come a long way. The history of Jamaica truly came into its own after independence. With historians like Sir Hilary Beckles, Lucille Mathurin Mair, and Barbara Bush, the end of colonialism and the rise of social and cultural history allowed for the history of Jamaica to contain more than just a brief mention of the island in British imperial sagas.<sup>7</sup>

Each of them overlap different historiographies as well, like political and cultural histories, which does not fulfill the need to give these women a historiography of their

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6 Berkin, *First Generations: Women in Colonial America*, 7 & Piya Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and Post/Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation*, 53.

7 Beckles, Hilary, *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave History*, 1999. & Bush, Barbara, "White 'Ladies,' Coloured 'Favorites,' Black 'Wenches'; Some Considerations on Sex, Race, and Class Factors in Social Relations in White Creole Society in the British Caribbean," *Slavery and Abolition* 2, 1981.

own. Researchers like Mair have published great works on all of the women of Jamaica. The problem with her work is that all of her elite women are the same. In her book, they are simple individuals who do not influence society very much on the island. She gives them one face and expects them all to fit into the categories she has placed them, before moving on to talk about slave women, creole women, and poor women, women she believed lived more dynamic lives. Similarly, Barbara Bush wrote articles about white women, but focused on their economic contributions, leaving elite women out because she did not believe that they put any effort into building the economy. Trevor Burnard focused on the legal rights of free women in Jamaica, which was the fact that women did not have any rights. It is far too difficult to get a complete picture of a group of women if we are shown that they are all the same, with no aspirations, no rights, no activities, and no differences.<sup>8</sup>

What do I hope to do with this? This work hopes to add to the historiography by giving these women back their individuality, giving elite women the chance to show how different they were from one another. Instead of giving a broad, but shallow, view of all women like Mair does, I decided to focus on just the elite women of Jamaica in the colonial period before the end of slavery. By focusing on elites and plantation mistresses, I believe we will catch a glimpse of something Mair is missing in her overview, a deeper look into the lives of these women. General histories only mention the fact that these women were here, and they do that by discussing the diary of Maria Nugent, forcing new researchers to assume that she was not the only elite woman on the

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8 Burnard, Trevor, "Inheritance and Independence: Women's Status in Early Colonial Jamaica," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48.1, January 1991.

island.

Instead of going through the lives of women from all walks of life, this focuses on elite women for several reasons. One, elite women were the most active in Jamaican society. They threw the parties, planned educations for their children, supported their husbands in their economic ventures, and ran households filled with guests and servants. Next, as the most most active in society, they had the most elaborate standards of living. This allows us to get a better picture of what life was like for these English women away from English home soil. In the great plethora of works on Atlantic World history, women's history, and British imperial history, I hope to find a niche and begin the expansion of the understanding of women throughout the British Empire in places that many people forget was the second home to many elite British women.

The secondary sources for this work come from many different places. Mair was one of the few that focused specifically on Jamaican women, but I found many other researchers whose work has contributed to this one. As stated previously, Sir Hilary Beckles and Barbara Bush have both put forth excellent works on women in the Caribbean. Trevor Burnard published an article about the legal status of elite Jamaican women. There are also many works that help gain a better understanding of Jamaican culture, such as Catherine Hall's work *Civilising Subjects*, which covers the effects of religion on the island. Since I am drawing parallels between the Jamaican women and other elite English colonial women, the works of scholars like Nicholas Dirks and Piya Chatterjee, mentioned earlier, have been invaluable to understanding women in India.<sup>9</sup> As for women in colonial North America, Mary Beth Norton and Carol Berkin are

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9 Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*.

incredibly useful in shining light on the lives of the women there.<sup>10</sup>

Primary works were extremely difficult to find. Years have ruined or destroyed much of what one would expect to find. Personal experience showed that, while the people who work in the Jamaican National Archives and the National Library of Jamaica are extremely friendly, they have a difficult time preserving their documents with small budgets and old, decaying buildings. Another problem is that when Britain handed Jamaica over to Jamaicans, many documents fell through the cracks. Many women also had their personal items shipped back to Britain when they left Jamaica. A great deal of them have never been recovered. What has been found, however, is incredibly valuable to the researcher that can find them and use them. From the letters of Ann Brodbelt to the diary of Maria Nugent to the myth of Annie Palmer, one can see that these women have a lot to offer the study of Jamaican history, and, in turn, the study of British imperialism and its effects on the people involved in it. Mrs. Brodbelt was a prolific letter writer, and she wrote many letters to her daughter, who was attending boarding school back in England. By finding her, I found an interesting insight into the social lives of elite women in Jamaica. Maria Nugent was the wife of the governor in the early 1800s. She not only organized many elaborate social gatherings at the governor's mansion, but she also traveled around the island and was able to see the relationships between women and African slaves. The story of Annie Palmer is a myth to many people, but Jamaica is one of those places where history and mystery collide. After days in the Jamaican archives, I found that not only was she a real woman, but there are many newspaper and church records of her, all of them revolving around her ownership of the

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<sup>10</sup> Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*.

plantation, Rose Hall. Other primary source records have been recovered, each with their own strengths that help illuminate the work. However, this is not where we want to start for this work.

### Layout

Chapter one will start with a brief history of the arrivals of women in Jamaica. This is where the secondary research from Mair was the most useful. In her overview, she spends a great deal of time describing how English women ended up migrating to the Caribbean. Here, I wanted to show how these women integrated their traditional duties as mothers, daughters, and wives into their new home. Marriage and motherhood are frequently named the most important parts of a woman's life during this time. The letters of women like Ann Brodbelt helped me to prove that. In her letters, and the writings of wealthy women like her, one finds that women took a great deal of pride in successfully bearing and rearing their children.

Chapter two is about elite women being plantation mistresses. This was a unique challenge for many women. While they may have been wealthy in England, Jamaica's slave society created a very different dynamic that they had to deal with. Women like Maria Nugent had a large home with many African servants, something she was not used to in England. She mentions over and over again in her diary how difficult it was to live with the African slaves and the changes having slaves had on their masters and mistresses. Her writings add valuable insight into how white women handled living with black slaves.

Chapter three deals with the importance of the island's social calendar and events. There was an extensive social season in the winter in Jamaica, when the weather

was not as hot and muggy, and many women saw this as the highlight of their year. Everyone from Maria Nugent to Ann Brodbelt impatiently waited for this. This gave women the chance to meet new, eligible bachelors and set them on the path to marriage and motherhood. It also allowed them to visit with their friends who might live on plantations many miles away. Women even used the social gatherings to help their husbands in their business ventures.

Some authors believe that women are vapid parts of history, particularly elite women. I found that these women were very important facets to life in Jamaica. They may not have been the most vocal or prolific population on the island, but the records that they did leave behind show a complex group of women that missed home, but carved a niche for themselves in an unforgiving part of the world.



## Chapter I:

### The Arrival of British Women in Jamaica and Their Roles as Wives and Mothers

#### How did British women arrive?

British women coming to the Caribbean arrived in a variety of ways. The first British women who officially arrived in Jamaica were the wives of soldiers and officers.<sup>11</sup> When the Spanish vacated the bigger island of Jamaica, British soldiers immediately moved in to provide protection and stability for the new territory. Women became an integral part of the colonization process, and were almost immediately set upon by the trials and tribulations that came with moving to a tropical island rife with pirates and diseases. It is how these women created a society of creole elites that I will discuss here. From there, we will cover the duties of a Creole wife and mother, the most important duty that elite women could undertake in any part of the Empire, and one in which they took pride in the Caribbean. In this chapter, though, I just want to make a point about one of the most prominent duties of women everywhere during this time, marriage and motherhood.

The middle of the seventeenth century was a tumultuous time for the English. As they were shaking off the memories of civil war and stepping onto the global stage, they moved and grew rapidly, trying to make a English, but soon to be known as a British presence all over the world. The Caribbean islands seemed like an area of bounty, and the seafaring European countries began to fight over them to see who would dominate the region. As Spain grew weaker, the British stepped up to take their place as the preeminent naval nation. This meant that more and more of Spain's overseas territories

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<sup>11</sup> Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica, 1655-1844*, 4.

were being transferred, sometimes through peace treaties signed in far away European countries and sometimes through conquering Caribbean spits of land one island at a time, to the British. For the government in London, any territories and colonies gained meant more power and ways to make more money. Jamaica was one of those colonies. The British saw this island as an instant cash-producing part of the imperial economy (although no one was calling it an imperial economy this early on in Britain's attempts to grow and spread to the four corners of the globe), and leaped at the opportunity to make it their own.

The English made their initial landing on the island of Jamaica in 1645, when they proceeded to defeat the Spanish army in battle after battle, slowly pushing the soldiers further back until, finally, in 1670, the Spanish decided to formally cede the island to the English. When they relinquished Jamaica to the British, a developing plantation economy was already in place. Many of the Spanish landowners and officials had transported their wives and families to the island and set up a Spanish society there. These women lived in plantations spread across Jamaica, and, according to historian Lucille Mathurin Mair, were apparently very happy in their homes. When the British and Spanish made their treaty and the Spanish gave up Jamaica, all of the Spanish subjects were given the option of evacuating to Cuba or becoming British citizens.<sup>12</sup> Many patriotic Spanish families chose to leave immediately. Women were particularly at risk during this venture. Their husbands and fathers were off with the soldiers defending against the English invasion, and they were left alone in their villas. When it came time to give up the land and move on, the women were the ones forced to pack off and leave

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 7.

in a hurry. The ones less happy about moving were captured and held by the British; some were eventually released to rejoin the Spanish in Cuba and Florida, while others simply disappear from official Spanish records. Many are assumed to have assimilated into British society.<sup>13</sup> Since they were Spanish, they are considered the first white women in Jamaica, but the British white women who soon joined them became the predominant European women on the island.

Leading officers in the initial English expedition gained special permission to bring their wives with them. While this was not an altogether popular move, it set a precedent for wives asking for government assistance to join their husbands overseas.<sup>14</sup> General Robert Venables was the first to ask to take his new bride with him in the seventeenth century, and Elizabeth Venables became notorious for being a poor companion on the island of Jamaica. As the Spanish were retreating before their final defeat, they had one last victory at Santo Domingo. The government back in London blamed the British defeat on Elizabeth Venables and other wives who were allegedly bringing down the campaign because of their distaste for the area and the weather and their inability to adapt away from England.<sup>15</sup> This perception became a problem later for wives in other British colonies who wanted to join their husbands. For example, nearly a century later, India became another colony in which wives petitioned to join their soldiers in the field. They faced many of the same issues as women in Jamaica until the residencies, or compounds, that held British citizens were built to house elite white women in South Asia. These residencies were built to keep the morale of white women

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13 Ibid, 7.

14 Ibid, 9-10.

15 Ibid, 4.

up so it would be easier for them to provide a warm, stable environment for their husbands. Once these women made it to the Caribbean or to India, they spent much of their time trying to sequester themselves away from people of color. Elite women were particularly guilty of this, and their relationships with African men and women in the Caribbean will be covered in more detail in the next chapter.

There is insufficient documentation to determine whether the accusation that wives undermined soldiers' morale was true. Some contemporaries, like Robert Venables, stated that it was simply the change in climate that affected the British troops, and not his wife's ill temper in the tropical heat.<sup>16</sup> Parliament and the British military command did not agree on the status of wives as morale boosters. Parliament believed that wives were moping about and bringing the men down, while the military believed the women were necessary to keep the men entertained and make them forget about being so far from home. Nevertheless, the two groups did agree that women were needed to create a stable colony; men had to have women to marry so that they could put down roots and start British families in Jamaica and Barbados.

Elizabeth Venables was not the first wife to ask to accompany her husband to the Caribbean, but she was the first to make an impact and be mentioned in the records of the people trying to govern the new British colonies. Others followed her, and these women encountered problem after problem, many of them stemming from the great distance between the Caribbean and the mother country. One of the issues of being a soldier's wife was receiving the money owed to her husband for living expenses while the rest of the family was in England. The soldiers themselves had a difficult time getting paid

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

regularly overseas. There were many reasons for this, including privateers from other countries sacking ships with pay aboard, pirates doing much the same (sometimes it was very difficult to tell the difference between a privateer and a pirate), hurricanes that would sink anything in their paths, and, finally, British bureaucracy which was sometimes slower than a packet ship across the Atlantic. It could take soldiers months to get their pay; however, it could take their wives even longer to receive their government money. Many wives would find that being stationed in the colonies with their husbands allowed them to stay away from the brink of starvation by receiving money more regularly. For women with small children to feed, being stationed in an outpost far from England was preferable to seeing their little ones go hungry or without proper clothing.

To get to the Caribbean, many of these wives would apply for government assistance in reaching their husbands. As stated previously, this was exactly what the British government wanted; good British citizens to build a proper, stable British colony. Many wives received up to £50 to travel to Jamaica. They would pack up their lives, and sometimes their children's lives, to board a ship and come to the Caribbean. Soldiers' families were the first English settlers to start creating an English society, but they were not the last. After the soldiers had made the area safe, business owners and farmers were the next to move in. With them came even more women who followed husbands. However, not enough women were making the journey in the early to mid-seventeenth century. The British government became more and more concerned about the ratio of men to women in the area. If they wanted their single men to marry, they needed eligible women, and fast. Starting with Cromwell and the Protectorate, many single women, usually impoverished women, were strongly prodded, and sometimes forced, to leave

England, Scotland, and Ireland to come over; in Ireland, for example, once Cromwell defeated Irish rebels and claimed the island to be conquered, he kidnapped hundreds of young Irish girls and had them transported to the Caribbean as indentured servants, or simply as slave labor for English immigrants.<sup>17</sup> Historians usually associate this seizure of people and their forced relocation to the Caribbean with Barbados. However, many indentured servants, some of them indentured against their will, made their way to other British colonies in this manner, including Jamaica.

The Lord Protector played a big role in bringing women to the English islands of the Caribbean. For Cromwell, it was an easy way to kill two birds with one stone. He and the British government, on one hand, saw it as the removal of “undesirables” from a contested area.<sup>18</sup> On the other, he could send women to the Caribbean to be servants and wives to all of the soldiers he had sent, and he could also more easily put down the resistance in Ireland if he could ship out the younger trouble-makers. Eventually, some gained their freedom, but they were discriminated against at every turn by the anti-Catholic British government with laws forbidding them to own a certain amount of land, to vote, or even trade with certain merchants, making the Caribbean as inhospitable for Irish as Ireland itself was.<sup>19</sup> This was a fate decided automatically for Irishmen, something they were used to in their own country as it came more and more under the control of the British. Irish women also had a very few different choices available to them. If they could distance themselves from their Irish backgrounds, they could marry into other levels of society, some of them even becoming wealthy mistresses in their own

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17 Sheppard, *The “Redlegs” of Barbados: Their Origins and History*, 19.

18 Ibid, 19-20.

19 Ibid, 24.

right.

How else did British women come to Jamaica? The easiest way was through the institution of indentured servitude. There were a great deal of indentured, white, female servants going to all corners of the empire, but particularly across the Atlantic to the North American and Caribbean colonies. Many men and women made the journey to the New World this way, but women more commonly became indentured servants after the initial wave of male immigrants had started a new colony. Indentured servants were among the first women to land in the Chesapeake colonies in North America where, if they survived, they became the wives of former male indentured servants who had made their fortunes as tobacco farmers and plantation owners.<sup>20</sup> These were also among the first white women to land in the British Caribbean.<sup>21</sup> Many were poor English women who traded their freedom for a chance to get away from English debtor's prison and to have a way to eat and keep clothes on their backs.<sup>22</sup> As in the Chesapeake, in socially mobile colonies it was easy for an indentured female servant to become the wife of a wealthy planter.

English women in the Caribbean also numbered among elite women of the time; they were women who could boast of owning another person, or who belonged to the larger slave-holding families of this island.

The slave holding elite on the island made up a large portion of the island's economy, and women were extremely important in this area, even if they did not make

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20 Berkin, *First Generations: Women in Colonial America*, 7.

21 Bush, "White 'Ladies,' Coloured 'Favorites,' Black 'Wenches'; Some Considerations on Sex, Race, and Class Factors in Social Relations in White Creole Society in the British Caribbean," *Slavery and Abolition* 2, (1981): 247.

22 Mair, 20-21.

up a majority. However, there were enough of them in the Caribbean to make them a force in the development of Jamaica. With money, and their husbands' power, they were very important to the social structure of this Caribbean gem. There is a reason that the governors' wives had to make the necessary rounds to visit all of these ladies as soon as their governor-husbands were installed. These elite mistresses were the women who ran the social scene in Jamaica. As Chapter three will discuss in greater detail, that this colony's social scene made and unmade prestigious families and could make them even greater. It could also draw them down to the level of poor whites in the eyes of their peers on the island and in the metropole.

There were two types of elite white women living in Jamaica who were wealthy enough to own slaves. There was also a group of white women known as Creoles. Creole women were normally the daughters of white Britons that had immigrated to the Caribbean. Although "Creole" is also the term often used to describe mixed children of slave women and the men who owned them, here it refers to white women born on Jamaica to white parents. It has been known to pop up in other areas of study of children born out in the British Empire. These women usually became the plantation mistresses that so many historians know of, but never elaborate on since the husbands, or plantation owners, usually seem more important. They built the Creole society that is the subject of chapter three.

There were also, of course, elite women who accompanied their husbands from Britain to stay temporarily, such as the wives of government officials and soldiers, including Lady Maria, the wife of Lord Nugent, one of the governors of Jamaica in the early nineteenth century. When they arrived, they rarely owned slaves, since servants



were much more common in the metropole. However, once they settled down in their government homes, it seemed almost necessary to own at least one black domestic servant. Lady Nugent, as we will find a little later, personally found slavery distasteful, but could not escape it in Jamaica. These women came and were subject immediately to the oppressive heat and the problems of malaria. They often died of these maladies, or they lived a short while, only to die in childbirth. If they survived, they would serve their terms in the Caribbean and would then, thankfully, return to Great Britain.

The elite women of Jamaica, those that managed to survive, were left to deal with their tropical, slave-driven paradise. They lived on the edge of a society that needed slavery to exist, but they desperately desired, more than anything, to emulate the English society that many of them had left behind. There may have been two types of elite women, but all women struggled to make their lives familiar and comfortable. All of these women led lives that they believed were perfectly normal for plantation mistresses and wealthy women of the time, but what were those lives? How did these women live?

One of the best ways to discover answers to this question is with information from the women themselves. Primary sources that exemplify the facts and history of this period are very useful to truly understanding the elite women of Jamaica. Many of these women were prolific letter and diary writers, though much of their writing has been lost to time and family collections. Those who stayed in the islands used writing as a way to vent their frustrations with society, weather, servants, or any number of other real or imagined slights against them. For many it was the only way to escape their little worlds and interact with others far away. Many of the primary sources used here were letters or diaries kept by women living on the island; women who either volunteered to come to

help their husbands, or were born here or felt pressed to join their families on Jamaica.

The Life Cycle of an Elite Creole Woman: The Duty of Marriage and Childbirth

The most important things to elite Creole women were the same important things to elite women across the British Empire, being a wife and mother. This was the first and most important duty to their family and their Empire. They did not “work” in or outside the home; they lived in leisure supported by their husbands' plantations and government pensions.<sup>23</sup> From a young age, such women were pushed towards advantageous marriages. In the Caribbean, the most elite women were told to marry either planters or high-ranking British officers. They were groomed for it in their sugar plantation “big houses.” These marriages would hopefully aid in the ascent of a girl higher up the social ladder. But if this was not the result, a status quo wedding would not be too upsetting to the parents. The important thing was to improve, or to at least maintain, the family's social standing in Creole society. Like other white social climbers, young ladies eagerly awaited the balls and parties of the social season for the chances of courtship and status improvement that they allowed.

Creole girls born in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century were not likely to survive long. Then again, hardly any children survived past toddlerhood. This was something that all parents accepted and realized could happen to them at any moment. Tropical illnesses wreaked havoc on local populations. Fevers were a constant worry. One woman wrote to a relative back in England that a “violent fever” struck her down and for days the patient was delirious and close to death for nearly a month.<sup>24</sup> This threat

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<sup>23</sup> Shepherd, 31.

<sup>24</sup> G. Forbes to Peter, January, 8, 1812, The National Archives of Jamaica, File 4/110, Reference 18.

could come from anywhere and caused a great fear among the inhabitants so that many parents would try to have as many children as the mother could physically handle with her delicate body. Children were one of the most precious commodities of the new, unstable colonies. They were needed to create the new British society, and, as stated previously, many women of child-bearing age were persuaded to move to the Caribbean. Once they arrived, the already difficult process of giving birth to a child was made even harder by the tough climate and slow development of the cities and places that would provide doctors or midwives.<sup>25</sup> Women would go into seclusion before the birth, usually in a dark room with few windows, and then summon whoever they could to their sides. White and black nurses and maids were usually present for the birth, and, if necessary, a doctor would be called if the mother was close enough to a town to get the doctor there on time. The governor's wife was told that the army doctor would be on hand if it was absolutely necessary.<sup>26</sup> If not, the lady had to depend on women who had hopefully had children of their own to help bring the new baby into the world. Lady Maria Nugent mentioned battling heat and mosquitoes during her labors, something that made her fear for herself and the child.<sup>27</sup> In her diary, we find a great deal of information about what it meant to be an elite wife and mother in the British Caribbean. The diary of Lady Maria Nugent is one of the few full, first-hand accounts to survive from the Caribbean by a white female author. Her entries give historians some of the only information that they have about the plantation mistresses. She also paid particular attention to their child-bearing traditions, after-birth care, and early child-rearing techniques, being a mother

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25 Mair, 118.

26 Nugent, 163.

27 Nugent, 164.

herself who bore children on the island. It was a difficult process, and one that not everyone survived in the tropical climate. If the birth was a success and mother and child both lived, then the debate began on whether or not to provide a wet nurse for the child.

A wet nurse was someone an elite woman would employ to nurse her infant. Breastfeeding was a job that elite women detested. They believed that only lower class women breastfed their own children, an attitude that they brought from England to the Caribbean. If one could afford it, then it was obvious that she should hire a wet nurse. While many women could not afford to do anything but care for their own child, this meant that the real debate was between elite women on both sides of the “pond.” For many of the women on the sugar plantations, it was easy to just choose a pregnant slave to do the nursing. Women in England, though, thought that this was an abomination. Having a black woman nurse a white child was completely unacceptable to many white people. However, once in the languid, tropical Caribbean, such attitudes would change, and many elite women modified their opinions to suit their needs. White children would suckle on their black wetnurses until they were over a year old, something that mothers in the metropole would never have allowed, but that women in Jamaica allowed for all of their children because it made their lives easier, and was also a symbol of their high status.<sup>28</sup>

Next, it was time to determine what form their education would take. Education was completely different for white boys and girls. Since girls were not eligible for a formal education in the schools that we are accustomed to today, they were usually separated from the boys to learn different skills. The young sons of the elite were packed

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28 Mair, 118-19.

up and sent off to English boarding schools at an early age. Most girls, however, began their education at home, learning many domestic chores. Sewing was usually chief amongst them, followed by lessons in household management.<sup>29</sup> Other lessons included singing, musical instruments, fashion, decorating, and writing. However, it was difficult to plan for the education of young girls in Jamaica and Barbados. In the Caribbean, women, especially those of child-bearing age, did not seem to survive very long, so very little was invested in their education. One finds, particularly in the Jamaican records, that life in the area was difficult and that it ended quickly. The deaths of white people, men and women, outnumbered births across the island.<sup>30</sup> This was particularly true of young girls, so no real formal education existed for them. Each family took a daughter's education with a view towards practicality. Was the girl healthy enough for a formal education? Were her marriage prospects much improved by this education? Could the family afford it?

For most elites, the answer to the last question was the most important. Not every elite family could afford what was considered the “best” education, which meant sending the girl overseas to England. Those that did expected the best results. One such family was the Lawrence family. Lemar Lawrence owned a prosperous plantation on the island, and was one of the few landlords that did not believe in absenteeism. He and his wife set up a permanent home on the island, but when their daughter, Mary, was born in 1766, they knew she would be going to school back in England. As an adolescent, Mary's parents chose a finishing school for her in Chelsea and eagerly awaited any news from

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29 For more information, see chapter two.

30 Burnard, “Inheritance and Independence: Women's Status in Early Colonial Jamaica,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48.1, (January 1991), 99.

her. The national library in Jamaica managed to collect a few of the letters that Lemar sent to his daughter, a young girl between twelve and fourteen (the letters do not specify), although her own letters have sadly disappeared in the nearly three hundred years since she wrote them.

For girls that were sent away to school, their parents expected excellence in their studies. While they may not have been learning math, history, or science, these young ladies still needed to display a certain level of academic achievement, usually in writing, music, and languages. For Lemar Lawrence, he saw changes in his daughter almost immediately, but warned her to not be complacent at school. “Your last two letters,” he stated in the early eighteenth century, “are such as please me highly, but remember you are not to stop there – as you grow up, more will be expected...”<sup>31</sup> One of the things that impressed him the most was the improvement in his daughter's penmanship. He wrote, “It gives me infinite pleasure to see your improvement; your letters begin to be with that degree of care and neatness which should always form part of a lady's letters.”<sup>32</sup> While he and his wife were pleased with her growth and development, giving her this education while being non-absentee landholders meant being parted from their only daughter for months or years at a time. “Your absence of five weeks, my dear Mary, appears to me as a year, what must I say when at the end of six or eight months.”<sup>33</sup> The Lawrences were willing to send their child away in order to get her the best education they could afford.

One elite woman actually took the time to write of her experiences giving birth and raising a child in the Caribbean, Lady Maria Nugent. Lady Nugent was from a

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31 Lemar Lawrence to his daughter, Letter 1, 1778, The Jamaican National Library Collection. MS 1778

32 Ibid, Letter 1

33 Ibid, Letter 5. For information, see Chapter 2.

prominent British family, whose own family escaped the American Revolution. After her death, her published diary became one of the most popular resources for historians of the British Caribbean. Her husband, George, was the Lieutenant-governor and commander-in-chief of Jamaica and its British military forces, from 1801 to 1806.<sup>34</sup> While this is late in our time period, the attitudes of the eighteenth-century British Empire carried over into the new century until the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. This makes the Nugents' time in the Caribbean useful, and once one picks up the writings of Lady Nugent, one finds that the island of Jamaica almost exists in a languid time warp where the planters and elite ladies do the same thing day in and day out, every social season.

At first, she was thankful for going to Jamaica because it meant the end of their stay in Ireland, which she found repulsive and disgusting.<sup>35</sup> On their way to their new posting, Maria Nugent decided to start a journal to capture her experiences in the Caribbean, something she was extremely excited about. This meant that she served as hostess for his many gatherings, which will be covered in greater detail in chapter three. However, much of her attention was focused on her children, trying to keep them from picking up what she considered the bad habits of Creole children, one of them being the problem of spending too much time with African children of a similar age.

When Lady Nugent arrived in Jamaica, she had only her husband and her worries about moving to the Caribbean. However, during her second year there, 1802, she gave birth to her first healthy child, a boy.<sup>36</sup> Her daughter followed the next year. In her

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34 Nugent, 1-2.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid, xv.

journal, she described the environment and traditional methods of childbirth, which she was required to go through for her own children. She stated first that the heat was oppressive during her confinement. With the shades closed and all the doors and windows shut, Lady Nugent stated that the temperature could be described as “nothing but dreadful.”<sup>37</sup> She had many maids and nurses at her side; an African nurse, Nurse Flora, brought many traditional herbs and experiments to try. At first, the laboring mother found the black woman's anecdotes and stories funny, but she soon became terrified that she might actually be tied to her birthing bed and pinched and prodded as the old lady had recommended and had said she had done with success on other Creole mothers.<sup>38</sup> Once the child was born, though, Lady Nugent was simply pleased that she had lived and that the child had lived through the first night, something not all Creole mothers could claim to have done.

Jamaica was not the only colony that British women came to, though. As the British became more and more the rulers of the seas, their dominions and spheres of influence began to be seen around the world. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were only the beginning when it came to British imperial rule, but this two hundred year period saw some great leaps in expansion. They also saw some of the greatest periods of migration away from Britain, and not just of men. Women left for the far corners of the known world, intent on helping their fathers and husbands build better lives for their families. The Caribbean was a common destination for many British women. However, there were two other places where women would go to start over. One was the North

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37 Ibid, 164.

38 Ibid.



American colonies, particularly the thirteen that would later become the United States of America. The other was the exotic land known as India. Women in these two areas shared a very similar experience to those in Jamaica, although there were a few key differences. By looking at women here, we can glean a clearer picture of what it was like to be an elite British woman far from Britain, learning how to cope with the difficulties of their colonial lives.

In the North American colonies, British girls had many of the same problems as their Jamaican sisters when it came to marriage and childbirth and education, particularly in the southern plantation colonies. From the Chesapeake area, which included the colonies of Maryland, Delaware, and the largest of the region's colonies, Virginia, down through the Carolinas and Georgia to the edge of Spanish Florida, colonial daughters were not given much in terms of a formal education. They too were given the domestic skills needed to be good wives and mothers in the future, because these were deemed the most important. However, the one fundamental difference between the North American colonial girls and the ones of the British Caribbean, is that many of the former, particularly in the Chesapeake and coastal South Carolina, were taught to read. This emphasis on literacy happened for two main reasons.

The first was that so many fathers believed that their children, sons and daughters, should be able to read the Bible.<sup>39</sup> One of the reasons that people came to North America from England was religious freedom, and many parents exercised this right by learning to read, teaching their children to read, and owning a family Bible. With life being so difficult for men and women, a firm knowledge of the Bible was a way that many of

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39 Berkin, 3.

them coped with their surroundings, so being able to read the Word was important.<sup>40</sup>

However, British people came to the Caribbean to participate in a growing international economy. While religion was still important to them, many of them chose to worship the British pound and did not instill the same religious practices in their children as their brethren further north did. Religious studies, along with sewing and a few other practical and domestic lessons, were the important skills imparted to colonial girls, particularly on tobacco and indigo plantations in the southern half of the North American colonies.

The second reason was in regards to the high death rates in the North American colonies, particularly for southern colonies. Like Jamaica and Barbados, many men and women could not cope with the new disease vectors, and many died at an early age. Women in the early North American colonies also had the same problems with child-bearing, and few of them lived to an old age. Therefore, in some remote areas, like the plantation south of Georgia and South Carolina, some fathers would train daughters to be able to run the day to day operations of the plantation. For example, one father taught his daughter to not only read, but also basic business math. Eliza Lucas was the oldest of her father's children, and since her mother was an invalid and her father needed to be on their land in Antigua, she became the plantation mistress at the age of sixteen.<sup>41</sup> The Bible was not the only thing she knew how to read, as historian Carol Berkin states that Lucas was constantly referring to her weathered copies of John Locke's works.<sup>42</sup> She was educated in England, in a similar fashion to the daughter of Lemar Lawrence. Lucas's education helped save her father in succeeding years as Eliza began to experiment with

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40 Ibid, 4.

41 Ibid, pg. 129-130

42 Ibid, 132.

new crops including indigo in Low-country South Carolina. This allowed her to run the plantation on her own while her father was away in England dealing with other business ventures. For a man with many children, this was an important accomplishment. Why did this not happen in the Caribbean? For many fathers in Jamaica, their daughters were either considered not smart enough, or not responsible enough to have that much training in the day to day maintenance of the plantation, whereas, in the North American colonies, women were expected to be help mates and sometimes partners in the management of the farm and the home. And with the Creole woman's education strictly limited to the art of courtship and a few domestic frivolities, Caribbean women rarely received the opportunity to take part in their fathers' or husbands' businesses.

There are historians that refute this idea. According to Mary Beth Norton, most women did not keep up with the family finances or anything but “feminine chores” in the household.<sup>43</sup> She maintains that these women knew that their most important task was to have children and care for them. Norton says that this eventually translated into the American idea of the Republican Mother, a woman whose only jobs were to create a safe and warm environment for American men and to raise good American sons, men with strong moral and ethical fiber.<sup>44</sup> America, though, has always been a land of tenuous social conventions. Necessity could change what was considered “normal” societal behaviors. What does not seem to change, though, is that no matter what education or household duties a woman may be taking, marriage and childbirth, were the two most important duties of women across all parts of the empire. The debate about whether or

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43 Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, xii.

44 Ibid, 298.

not women were involved in household finances rages back and forth between historians. However, it cannot be denied that women like Eliza Lucas did exist, and she never thought herself an oddity in her world. She bounced back and forth between society and the workings of the plantation with ease, and with death possible either by disease, or by the sea, having someone else maintain the home and plantation would allow for the business to continue running and provide for any orphans left behind. Some men liked having this surety and appreciated all that their wives and daughters could learn in the Caribbean as well.

On the other side of the world, the British Empire was just beginning to take root in India during the seventeenth century. India, which was to become the crown jewel in the British Empire in the nineteenth century, was, at this point, still the plaything of the East India Trading Company. However, more and more English men and women were traveling to this area to get an early stake in what they saw as a potentially integral part of the global economy. Just like they had taken control of many of the shipping lanes in the Caribbean, the Company was starting in the port cities of India and working its way inward from the coast. Women were not a part of this initial movement. Unlike the Caribbean, the wives of soldiers and officers did not accompany their husbands to India because the focus was not to colonize in the seventeenth century. Here, the purpose of the soldiers was to protect the trading interests of the Company, and therefore, the trading interests of England; before the end of the eighteenth century, this had completely changed into a colony in India, something the British had not even initially wanted.<sup>45</sup> After a few enterprising officers took over province after province, the British found

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45 Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*, xii.

themselves controlling an extremely large colony in Asia. This did not happen overnight, and there are still many historical debates about how it happened, but most agree that by the middle of the eighteenth century, the British took responsibility for India and many men and women began to take the journey to India to help make it more British.

While this is an extremely over-simplified version of the colonization of India, it provides us a solid foundation that leads to the understanding of the elite British women who made it to India. They faced many of the same issues with heat and sickness as women in the Caribbean did. These women also had to try and figure out how to marry, bear children, educate those children, and survive the radically different climate. Like Caribbean elites, they also had a “slave” population that they had to contend with, which will be dealt with more in the next chapter. Unlike Caribbean elites, though, these women did not come to India without already having a husband. Women born in India were usually taken back to Britain to find a husband. Women who traveled to India did not come without their husband or without the expectation of meeting their husbands in India. Courtships did not happen regularly here, although childbirth was definitely not uncommon amongst British women, who had to battle the same problems of heat and disease to deliver a healthy child and survive, just like the women in Jamaica.

The height of British power in India is said to be the nineteenth century, however, they were planting themselves firmly into place before the end of the eighteenth. Many ladies, when they arrived, were immediately taken to a British stronghold, where they were to spend much of their time, if they were not on the plantation. These residencies would have clubs, shops, and places for women to gather and socialize, without having to come in contact with the native peoples of India. Eventually, though, British women

made their way onto tea and cotton plantations, and there they became much the same plantation mistresses that one would find in the Caribbean or the American colonial South. Here, they were known as “memsahibs,” or white, upper class women. They were given control of a native population, which quickly became the serving class, not slaves as the Africans brought to the Caribbean were. The memsahibs were placed in close proximity to the servants and told to create a “family” atmosphere to keep up the moral defense for slaveholders.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, however, no white woman thought that the Indians were equal to the whites. The caste system that had been in place for hundreds of years was kept in place by the British; it was just re-configured to keep the whites on top of it to suit their own ideas of race and power.<sup>47</sup> Memsahibs lived luxurious lives with many servants in what they considered “quaint” bungalows. Like women in the Caribbean and the Americas, they would try to re-create a British lifestyle in a foreign land. Many of them were trained in domestic duties, and then sent to finishing schools back in the metropole to pick up skills in music, dancing, and advanced sewing, just like elite girls from across the empire. Once they returned, many searched for an eligible husband to marry and continue the way of life they knew so well. As Piya Chatterjee says in *A Time for Tea*, “Colonial selfhood would be refashioned again and again within the iconic encirclement of the bungalow's garden, the rounds of polo at the club, the punkah (fan) pulled gently by an attentive native servant.”<sup>48</sup> In this way, white women who were born and bred in peripheral colonies were incredibly similar. These women strongly desired the English manor lifestyle, and since they were not in England,

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46 Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery, and Law in Colonial India*, 4.

47 Ibid, 6-7.

48 Piya Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and Post/Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation*, 53.

tried hard to have it in India, Jamaica, Barbados, and parts of the American colonies. Missing their home gave them an obsession with trying to mimic trends back on the home island, and they did so with much gusto.

After elite Creole women returned to the Caribbean from finishing school, they usually immediately began to prepare for marriage. Eligible husbands were abundant in the Caribbean. With the plantation owners and officers around, women, who were always the minority, had their pick. Since the death rates for women were extremely high, men with means usually married two or three times. They needed someone to care for their children by a previous wife. Women were used to marrying older men, some of them with children already and households full of slaves and servants that needed direction. And with their educations and domestic preparations, many women were ready to accept any children from a previous marriage and geared up to have their own to add to the growing brood on the plantation.

Once married, these women, while they may not have been expected to perform manual labor, did have duties required of them by their husbands. While they did expect their wives to run elegant and refined households and to greet the neighboring elites with dignity and hospitality, husbands knew that their wives were first expected to bear healthy children. Knowing how difficult this was in any place, much less a tropical climate that they were not used to, many men accepted their wives' "lazy" lifestyle and did all that they could to ensure their continued happiness and stay in the islands. They knew that if they did not, many women would return to England to family and friends, some never to return. One Jamaican wife left under the pretense of taking her son to his boarding school in England, and she was one of many who did not spend much of her

married life with her husband.<sup>49</sup> She never went back to him, saying that the climate was too much for her and the African servants too difficult to deal with. Another, Anne Norris, married her husband William in the early eighteenth century. He went off to Jamaica to see to some land he had purchased there and tried to start a plantation. The horror stories of other elite women who had gone kept Anne from joining him, and she stayed in their London home, separated by miles of ocean from her husband. In 1734, William died there, alone. Anne was left in London, not knowing what to do with the property in the Caribbean, so she had the Lord Mayor of London help her in appointing an attorney to settle the affairs abroad for her.<sup>50</sup> The help of a man seemed the only way to settle affairs for a woman during this time and a regular feature of coverture, and the more prominent the man, the better. Jamaica could be difficult for men and women, but elite women, used to a very different lifestyle, could find the places unbearable, and many chose to leave after a few years.

Being a wife and mother was the primary duty of elite women on Jamaica. These tasks themselves were very difficult for some women, but those that accomplished these duties took pride in their labors and attempted to raise good British boys and girls for the Empire. This is what many elite women tried to do, not only in the Caribbean, but in India and the American colonies as well. Historian Carol Berkin and other historians, like Mary Beth Norton, state “that genteel women were circumscribed by and identified with the domestic sphere, that they focused their energies on such private matters as raising children, and were more invested in appropriately feminine accomplishments than

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49 Mair, 17-18.

50 Anthony Scarlett, notary public, September 24, 1734, “Letter Concerning Anne Norris,” The Jamaican National Library Collection, MS 1118.



publicly acknowledged achievement and activity.”<sup>51</sup> While Norton is trying to prove this theory, Berkin is questioning it and the pretense that women were simple and lazy creatures. I believe that Berkin could make her case for women across the British Empire. What we find, though, is that the education of women at an early age allowed for some women to move out of the domestic sphere within their own home. Those women fortunate enough to have a decent education at home did not simply become the stereotypical “lazy” plantation mistresses that were written about by contemporaries such as Lady Maria Nugent and travel writer Robert Ligon. Although those women did exist, the management side of the plantation could be just as important to Caribbean women. The women who handled more than just their children and house slaves will be covered in the next part in greater detail. The following chapter explains how some elite women took control of their plantations and became mistresses in their own right.

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51 Berkin, 135.

## Chapter II:

### The Working Plantation Mistresses

Many contemporary writers viewed elite white women as fragile and delicate in their plantation homes on Jamaica. This, of course, frequently translated into “lazy” and “languid” by the men writing about the women they saw. Of course these ladies fulfilled their duty to their husbands and country by attempting to provide more than one healthy child, but after that, what did they do? Writers like Richard Ligon have stated that the elite women in the Caribbean spent their days trying to create hospitable atmospheres for guests and visitors, but that the rest of their free time was spent trying to rest or stay cool in the tropical heat.<sup>52</sup> Is that it though? Was that the extent of their activities? Did they try to take part in any other activities? Did they attempt to be like women in the British colonies in North America? What about India? Did those women lead active lives at all?

Some researchers say yes. Lucille Mathurin Mair, writes about how these elite women tried to run their own plantations at times, played an integral role in the education of children, and even became involved in the education and emancipation of African slaves in the British Caribbean. While her research, especially in *A Historical of Women in Jamaica, 1655-1844*, shows that the stereotype of the lazy plantation mistress is hard to fight, in some cases because it was completely true, many women were diligent in keeping up with some kind of work, outside of bearing children and playing the island socialite. Apart from Mair, one finds very few sources that can help in this understanding. This chapter seeks to supplement that work, as well as bring to light some of the extraordinarily exciting sources found in Jamaican archives and libraries. It

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<sup>52</sup> Ligon, Richard, *A True and Exact History of Barbados*, 1674.

shows that there were a great deal of women trying to work on their husband's and father's plantations, as well as showing that many of them knew about every aspect of the business, from the daily chore list of the plantation home to the price of a small male slave that was sold to another farm.<sup>53</sup> While Mair writes about the many women who were simply part of the ornamental features of a plantation, some women took a more practical approach to plantation life. While some women only made their mark as wives and mothers, there are accounts of many women that actively worked in certain areas of the farm.

In the first chapter, we discussed that their primary duty was to marry and bear children. However, these are not the only duties that they fulfilled. Their lives were also complicated by the obligations they had to the business side of their husbands' plantation. Along with this came a moral burden to the African men and women that they owned as slaves. All of these things are less studied parts of the lives of white women, but they are an important facet of the role women played as elite mistresses of Jamaican plantations.

#### White Women and Property

So what did they do? For many, it depended on their place on the social ladder of Jamaica, which depended almost strictly on money. The more money a family had, or could pretend to have, the higher up they were in society. Some women attempted to take part in the day to day tasks and chores of the plantation, but they would have done this quietly, because society did not appreciate an independent woman who wanted to be involved in the “dirty” business of slavery and mercantilism. This was also made

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<sup>53</sup> Ann Saunders, *1737-1740: Accounts of Barbican Plantation*, The National Library of Jamaica, MS 1121.

difficult by the English laws on both sides of the ocean dealing with a woman's right to property. Almost the instant a woman married, she lost all rights to any property she may have been given as a dowry or inheritance, in what Mair calls a “civil death.”<sup>54</sup> This was the standard practice in English common law. Women were second class citizens in Britain, and the British were known for lagging behind other European countries when it came to female property rights.<sup>55</sup> In the Caribbean, English law defined the status of women just as it did in the metropole, in some cases more so because there was so much more land to be had in a new frontier and land and property were a part of nearly every legal document, whether it was a will or marriage contract.<sup>56</sup> Land was how the English gentry defined themselves, and if they had the ability to pass it down to sons, that was always their first choice. However, daughters had to be taken care of and land and property became a way to do that too. This was the way many families tried to protect daughters from the gaps in English common law. Dowries became a way for fathers to ensure that their daughters would not be penniless if something happened to their husbands, while prospective husbands saw these dowries as a way to cement their own financial stability.<sup>57</sup> In any case, the dowry was the work of men, and daughters and prospective wives could only hope that they would come out well after the contracts were signed and sealed.

Women usually had no choices in what they received in their dowries. And they had absolutely no say in what their husband chose to do with property that was deeded to them. Once the marriage was official, all property came under the ownership of the

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54 Mair, 151.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid, 149.

57 Ibid, 152.

husband, and the only time that policy changed was in case of the death of the spouse. This was true of almost everything that a woman came into the marriage with. Silver, furniture, clothing, even slaves became the husband's personal property after the wedding.<sup>58</sup> The dower, or the property that went to a widow, was something that was decided in the marriage contract, but was constantly subject to change based on whether or not the couple had children, or whether the marriage was a happy one. A kinder husband would guarantee enough property or money to keep his widow comfortable after he was gone. However, even then, a widow was only legally entitled to up to half of the property, and if there were children this could be cut to a third.<sup>59</sup> Women lived in a state of uncertainty when it came to property rights. They could be promised many things, but if a father or husband changed their wills at the last moment, the English court system made it very difficult for the daughter or widow to overturn any changes and keep themselves in their plantation home or in any type of stable financial foothold. The best they could hope for was a kind husband who truly cared about their well-being.

One wife, Martha Hughes, wanted to publish her will to make sure that her children from her first marriage were taken care of if anything happened to her during her second marriage, something that was not uncommon. Hughes implied that her new husband would care for her children, and therefore made her new husband the beneficiary of everything she had “for and during the term of his natural life and no longer PROVIDED for my two sons.”<sup>60</sup> In it, she states that she had come into some property with the death of her first husband. She now owned a home in Kingston Parish.

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58 Ibid, 151.

59 Ibid, 151.

60 Martha Hughes Will & Testament, September 2, 1731, The National Library of Jamaica Collection, MS 466.

Hughes also became the owner of several slaves, and their names were listed in her will.<sup>61</sup> The slaves were to be left to her children, along with their “encrease,” or offspring. Her goal with her will was to protect her assets in case she died in childbirth with her child from her new husband, something that happened quite frequently, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

It was even more difficult for single women. Maids and spinsters existed in what Mair calls a “vacuum in society.”<sup>62</sup> On the surface, they appeared to have more freedom because they did not have a husband that laid claim to all of their properties and possessions as so many wives did.<sup>63</sup> However, they were, in a fashion, the laughing stock of European high society. A woman that chose not to marry was unnatural. Prevailing thoughts of that period were that a woman's duty was to marry and produce children, and spinsters spit in the face of that duty and tradition. So what were the boons of remaining single in this period? Not enough to make it worth the ridicule and behind-the-back whispers for most. A single woman could own property. Some were left property in wills by fathers, and they attempted to take control of it. A few women managed to take control of their property without having to answer to a man about their decisions. Adultery was a common problem that single women found that they did not have to deal with. The problems with concubinage were so numerous that they will be covered later, but, needless to say, many elite white women wanted a man without several mistresses of various degrees of mulatto heritage, and attempted to stay single until they found one. However, maintaining a plantation as a single woman could be

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61 Ibid.

62 Mair, 150.

63 Ibid, 150.

difficult in Jamaica because men did not trust women to do it properly; therefore they would refuse to work with her to hire overseers, buy slaves, or even sell crops. Most single elite women with property found it easier to simply marry, and many of them would jump on an incoming ship of British soldiers to find one “untainted” by creole society.

In the North American colonies, things were much different in terms of the property ownership. The further west a family of British colonists moved, the further they were, not only from Britain, but also from British laws and traditions governing property rights for women. In the Appalachians and frontier areas, women in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries could not be mistresses of a plantation, they had to be helpmates and co-workers of their husbands, and this made for “liberal modifications” in the law codes.<sup>64</sup> A woman who had spent most of her life working a piece of land felt she that she was owed more than a third of the property in the event of the husband's death. Women were very likely to actually inherit land if the children were minors. Any older children that the couple had were still part of the inheritance, but instead of dower, a widowed woman would stay on in the family household, sometimes continuing to work until she either remarried or enjoyed a simple retirement in the oldest child's home with his family. A plantation mistress hoped for much the same thing, and when she became a widow, she prepared to live off of what her husband had left her.

That was the dream; the reality was very different. Catherine Clinton explains that a widow with children was left in a precarious position within the plantation world. North American planters were notorious for not keeping their books properly, and in an

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64 Mair, 155.

already complicated time of trans-Atlantic trade, debt collectors were usually the first to knock at the door.<sup>65</sup> Since the plantation owners were land-rich and cash-poor, they had a mountain of debt that their wives usually had no clue existed. It was very difficult to not lose what land their husband had left them in lawsuit after lawsuit with the collectors. What made it even worse was that their land was not assured to them, and women spent a great deal of time worrying about whether the men around them would try to take their inheritance from them, since so many men were greedy and took advantage of women so easily in their time of grief.<sup>66</sup>

Laws in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were slowly changing the ways that men and women thought about the property rights of women. British women, as these laws changed, began to require set dowries, set dowers, and protection from men seeking to strip women of their property if they were not married at all. For women in Jamaica, the problem of losing everything to their husbands the instant they were married was something they all complained about, but rarely tried to do anything about, either because they felt they could not, or they did not understand all the ins and outs of the system.<sup>67</sup> These later nineteenth-century American women descended from women born in the British Empire, and even though the British themselves would not pass anything similar for another generation, white women in America can thank their British ancestors for getting the ball rolling in that direction.

In India, things were very different for a wife or widow. Property rights specific to this colony were not very important to the women living here. Since so many of the

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65 Clinton, 77.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid, 151.



women who went to India saw it as a temporary assignment with their soldier husbands, it did not make sense to invest a lot in gargantuan and palatial homes. They lived in the British residences and were seen to by Indian servants and usually never left the compound. Those that went to live on plantations in British India, lived like the plantation mistresses in the Caribbean, keeping to slow and languid activities in the tropical heat.

What did these women do? Most of them threw themselves into the art of hostessing, running a household of serving cooks, a wait staff, cleaners, and decorators to keep their home stylish and pristine. It was their duty to their husbands to provide such a home, and to stay in it, invisible to the outside world, until the right people entered the home and the wives could show their husbands' wealth and power in providing such a place.<sup>68</sup> They became renowned worldwide for being the best hostesses, keeping guests entertained as well as extremely well-fed with food that was supposed to rival the fanciest Indian restaurants in the residencies of the major British cities, such as Lucknow and Delhi.<sup>69</sup> The plantation mistresses thrived on providing an English style of society for their white guests, even in the far reaches of the empire. Like many of their sisters in other colonies, they liked to pretend that they were just as good as the English gentry at home, and did much to copy what they perceived to be this type of social life. Women in Jamaica needed these ties to the mother island, but they also had to put in some work themselves.

One of the most important jobs that women in the British Caribbean could help

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68 Ibid, 134.

69 Ibid, 126.

with involved keeping up with the account books of the farm and business. Some women kept meticulous records for the family plantation, which was one of the reasons that a woman's ability to write was so important, and why fathers like the Lawrences of the last chapter placed so many expectations on his daughter's handwriting skills. Some husbands expected their wives to know exactly what the larders held and what they needed to purchase to keep the place running smoothly.

The accounts of Mrs. Ann Saunders are on record for all to view at the Jamaican National Library. From 1737 to 1740, she kept an accurate accounting from month to month of all the money spent on her plantation, known as Barbican (or Barbican, as some spellings indicate). It is a fascinating picture of a woman keeping records on a plantation, showing her extensive knowledge of even the smallest details. There are charges for beef, padlocks, and a personal gun powder store, presumably for safety against slave rebellions.<sup>70</sup> With the exception of the gun powder, all of these things were immensely necessary for the day to day running of a farm. Ann Saunders kept meticulous records, marking her as a woman who was not simply content to sit in the “big house” all day and socialize or rest from the excessive heat. She and many women like her knew that part of their duties included keeping these records so that their husbands could run other parts of the plantation. It was a very crucial role, and one that Jamaican women fulfilled very well.

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70 Ann Saunders, *1737-1740: Accounts of Barbican Plantation*, The National Library of Jamaica, MS 1121.

### White Women and Their Servants and Slaves in the Home and in the Fields

As stated previously, on several occasions, Jamaican women understood that their first duty was to their husbands and children. However, some women also took it upon themselves to try to participate in their husbands' business ventures dealing with the plantation by keeping inventories and records of whatever the farm was producing, whether it was sugar, cotton, or even slaves. While this never included the negotiation of sugar prices, the transport of goods and products, or the hiring of overseers and the maintaining of sugar mills, women did have their place in the business side of things. For many, dealing with the business of the plantation meant that they had complete control in the handling, care and maintenance of all of their slaves and servants. It was assumed that women had the necessary skills for maintaining the family at home, and would, therefore, have the skills to maintain the home's servants and slaves. This became one of the most important duties that a woman could fulfill. While the husband was overseeing the business side of the plantation, the women saw to the daily needs of those working on the plantation, including food, shelter, medical care, and moral uplift. Some women embraced the role. Others refused to have anything to do with their black slaves but would educate and make clothes for their white servants. It was difficult for some women to even attempt to care for servants and slaves, because they had no skills other than ones that made them courtable in creole society. In extreme cases, women came to fear their servants and slaves because of the undercurrent of rebellion that would rise to the surface occasionally in the islands. No matter what, though, women were forced to deal with their "employees," and many of them found that they could hurt or help them, and would do so accordingly. This is where the discrepancy between the plantation

mistress as a stereotype and the plantation mistress in reality comes to full light, and it is important to recognize this for deciding what is real and what is not. I will show that the plantation mistress had a very important role to fill, and many participated in the lives of their slaves and servants to do their duty as the white, female head of household to an extent that few historians of the Caribbean have ever thought possible. Going through the records of the women and the stories of Africans brought to the island proves this and is slowly being uncovered today.

At first, it was very difficult for elite white women to move to Jamaica. The thought of leaving the comfort and familiarity of England was unbearable for some. Even though many women found the Caribbean devoid of any type of civilization appropriate for themselves, they eventually came anyway to the area.<sup>71</sup> Their first goal, particularly for the elite women used to a certain lifestyle back in England, was to create a similar lifestyle in their new, tropical homes. Those that could do that, and get used to the heat, were more likely to stay, and not leave their husbands to return “home.” Like later elite female inhabitants in India, anything that could be done to promote an English way of life was looked on favorably. Being the mistress of an elaborate household completed this facade. Servants were a constant part of life in the upper echelons of English society, and the tradition, though changed somewhat by slavery, carried on in the Caribbean.

After the initial settlements were complete, every elite woman had servants and slaves. Even though slavery did not take hold until the beginning of the sugar revolution in the 1640s, indentured servants were there almost from the beginning. Once these two

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71 Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 69.

groups were established, elite women had to deal with two completely different sets of people. White, indentured servants were a temporary group, and, while they did not have many rights, they were protected under English law, unlike slaves. That meant that when the plantation mistresses were on the plantation or in the house in the Caribbean for the social season, the slaves required a certain amount of care and attention, much as at the same time, landowners back in England thought it was their paternal duty to care for their white servants. It is important to note that Jamaica's plantation mistresses were not exempt from participating in this care. They, along with their husbands, sought to clothe and feed their servants and slaves and give them some sort of shelter from the elements. Some went above and beyond and had their servants' clothes sent from England, and gave them meat more than once a week, which was special to many slaves.<sup>72</sup> Others were far less kind. These sorts of mistresses, one of them even going down in myth and history as a vile slave owner, were hated by all the people they owned on the plantation. However, white, elite women in Jamaica, whether they believed in the institution or not, were forced to deal with slavery on a daily basis. With either cruelty or kindness, they made their marks on their servants as they struggled to create a world that made them comfortable and at home.

Slaves on the plantation were treated very differently. For the most part, they were there to work in the sugar cane fields and, while they required a certain amount of sustenance and care to be productive workers, they were seen as lower than white servants. Indentured servants had a contract and date to look forward to when they would attain their freedom. Slaves did not have anything like this. Once they arrived in

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72 Beckles. pg. 16.

the sugar islands, they were doomed to a hard life in the fields, fighting owner cruelty and hard work along with tropical heat and diseases that were different even from sub-Saharan Africa. Many died as a result, and they received little help from their masters and mistresses. While white men felt that Africans were not advanced enough to make it on their own, the pervasive desire to colonize all of Africa in the nineteenth century that partially justified the “scramble for Africa” had not fully formed yet. There were always some missionaries seeking to better the lives of their African brothers and sisters, but plantation owners, for the most part, did not always feel that same moral prick, especially at first, before the Baptists came to the Caribbean in droves, bringing the gospel and their own ideas of moral consciousness with them. As things changed and the splinter denominations became more prominent in the late 1700s and into the early nineteenth century, white, elite women felt more and more responsible for the spiritual care of their slaves, which led to a greater physical care on some plantations.

However, these spiritual changes did not occur overnight, if they occurred at all. When a plantation mistress dispensed necessary physical items to slaves, she was carefully monitored by her husband. Usually, slaves were given a set of clothes and were fed on a diet of cheap fruits, vegetables, and water. There was no gendered division of labor, so both black men and women labored on the plantation.<sup>73</sup> They usually worked from sun up to sundown, and were then given a small space on the floor of a poorly insulated cabin to sleep on. Many did not even get a lot of sleep due to the incessant running of the ingenio, or sugar mill.<sup>74</sup> The sugar plantation was a difficult place to

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73 Menard, 71.

74 Ibid, 15.

work, and the heat was not the only danger in this line of work. Sugar cane went through a long process of growth and then had to be fed into pieces of heavy machinery to extract the necessary liquids. After that, it had to be refined and turned into the granules that would make a plantation owner's books for years. Slaves were forced to participate in every part of the process, sometimes at risk of life or limb. Many slave mistresses knew this but chose to focus on making their slaves lives' survivable, instead of comfortable. Even they knew that the bottom line of the business was the most important to securing their own families' livelihoods.

Russell Menard states that slaves had to be skilled to work the ingenios necessary to purify the sugar, but that these skills did not make them any better treated by their masters.<sup>75</sup> African slaves were not rewarded based on their skilled labor, but were worked even harder to get the job done faster and better for their masters. Sugar was by no means the only crop grown in Jamaica. Tobacco, indigo, and cotton were also cultivated in this and other British colonies.<sup>76</sup> By the 1660s, however, sugar accounted for over half of the exports from Jamaica. It was the “sugar revolution” in much of the Caribbean and South America, and the British were constantly attempting to cash in on this product. It became the cash crop for plantation owners, leading to the growth of the creole society.

The domestic slaves and servants were given a reprieve from the field work, but had a whole other litany of problems to deal with. There was no way to limit the physical closeness of house servants.<sup>77</sup> Female workers, the most common in the

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75 Ibid, 16.

76 Ibid, 4.

77 Mair, 172.

plantation house, had to learn to deal with the advances of their owners. Many elite men took advantage of serving girls, and there is an entire mulatto society to prove that point. As Eliza Fenwick, a middle class woman observing Creole society from the end of eighteenth century, put it, "What is still more horrible, the Gentlemen are greatly addicted to their women slaves."<sup>78</sup> Mulattoes, half white and half black children, were seen in many parts of Jamaica. Fenwick stated that she was served lunch by a mulatto boy, who too greatly resembled the father of the two ladies she was eating with, to be anything but their brother.<sup>79</sup> Lady Nugent saw mulattoes when she toured Jamaica and found them revolting and pitiable at the same time. She was very surprised and disappointed when she visited the home of one of her husband's supporters, a Mr. Simon Taylor, and found that he had mulatto children in every home he owned on the island, which was a considerable amount.<sup>80</sup>

It is important to note that the relationships that resulted in these children were not consensual. Men took the concept of "owned" very seriously and would force women to serve them sexually. If a slave woman accepted her plight and did not fight back, she could expect somewhat better treatment from her male owner. The children of the elite men were usually well taken care of and many of them even created their own version of British society on the islands. Their fathers would even provide for them in their wills. Although never as much as the legitimate children, mulatto children usually found themselves in possession of a few pounds of gold or sugar, which was a precious commodity that could be sold for a small fortune at times.

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78 Fenwick, 169.

79 Ibid, 169.

80 Nugent, 93.



The wife of the master was a completely different story. Few historians recognize the role of the wife as a plantation mistress in the Caribbean, but they too played a role in the treatment of slaves. Historian Lucille Mathurin Mair states that the “...creole family with its half-brothers and half-sisters of various shades was anything but a tidy domestic organism,” and white women had to deal with this on a daily basis in their homes.<sup>81</sup>

Mair states that white women realized their place as second class citizens, subject to male domination. While they all seemed to accept this as part of their life, they also felt the need to assert their dominance over anyone they could, part of what could be considered their class identity.<sup>82</sup> Unfortunately, slaves were the only ones whom they could do that to. The quiet and demure wife of a white, elite man could be capable of unspeakable horrors. And with the importance placed on the home, women who saw “coloured” slaves and servants invading it tried many things to assert their power over those they saw to be lesser people because they were not white.

White, elite women knew that their husbands took advantage of servants and slave girls. They could not miss house workers that were pregnant, and the light-skinned children that would be the result of such a pregnancy. It was a strain on many households to provide for the mulatto children that were born.<sup>83</sup> While sometimes the white women would reject these children out of hand and never think of them again, that did not always happen. In Jamaica, the problem associated with the mulatto children was that they were not ignored. Sometimes they would be brought into the house from the slave cabins and raised as pets by the white mistresses. Eliza Fenwick noted that they

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81 Mair, 173.

82 Mair, 189.

83 Mair, 175.

were fed, slept in the big house and “reared with every care and indulgence” until they were grown up, when they were rudely thrown back out into the fields as a laborer.<sup>84</sup>

The Brodbelt family of Spanish Town would also take slave children in from the fields and teach them to read and speak like whites, leaving them completely in the care of white women of the household.<sup>85</sup> Mulatto children faced a difficult life in some instances. Those that were rejected by the plantation master could expect to live a life of slavery in the sugar cane fields. Others were actively cared for by the white family, even to the point of getting an education. In a few situations, some families provided years of support, and even left gifts for them in their wills, as stated previously. Such expenses, though, took away from the dowers that a wife expected should anything happen to her husband. In part because of this, white women could be very cruel to the servants in the plantation house. Punishments of these female slaves would be overseen by the wife, and were typically more violent than other punishments.<sup>86</sup> It was a vicious cycle that would transfer from slave to slave, whichever one the master was currently focusing his attentions on at the moment. On some level, the wives felt mistreated and could be furious with their husbands for cheating on them with someone they considered a lesser human because of their color. They were jealous and too insecure in their own positions to not bristle with anger.<sup>87</sup> White women also thought that African women seduced their husbands, and, therefore, found that they could punish the slaves through hard labor in the home and biting cruelty behind closed doors, something that Eliza Fenwick noted in

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84 Fenwick, 169.

85 Brodbelt, 47.

86 Mair, 176-177.

87 Mair, 176.

her letters home.<sup>88</sup>

In addition to this problem, there was the universal litany of daily chores. White women in all parts of the slave-owning Empire oversaw the efforts of their slaves in doing laundry, cleaning the house, child care, and some industrial matters, such as candle making or sewing, if they did not do the chores themselves. Only elite women were spared the constant harder labors of a farm or plantation. As several historians have pointed out, women's work activities depended on class. Carol Berkin states in the early North American colonial period, becoming a member of the elite class automatically allowed women to become managers of the household, instead of one of its workers.<sup>89</sup> Even so, the management of such a place intruded into every part of the elite woman's life. Slaves needed continuous care, a burden placed on the elite women of the era,<sup>90</sup> no matter their place within the empire. In the Caribbean, slaves were such a common part of the elites' lives, that they were known to sleep in the passageways of the big house to be right there if their white master or mistress needed something.<sup>91</sup>

There is a great deal of research done on the treatment of African slaves by white owners all over the world, but the Caribbean has always been an interesting returning point for historians. The cruelty of Caribbean masters and mistresses is well known. Others have come to mind. In the United States, the Deep South was a feared place among slaves in other areas. Brazil is also known for having the most mistreated and malnourished slaves, but the Caribbean is one of the best remembered. When most people think of the iniquities and injustices against slaves, they think of men committing

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88 Fenwick, 169.

89 Berkin, 141.

90 Clinton, 22.

91 Mair, 173.

these crimes. Surprisingly, though, one of the most enduring stories of horrific treatment of slaves was that of a woman, whose sadism is still remarkable today.<sup>92</sup> The White Witch of Rose Hall is nearly legendary. Because this was an oral tale, passed around slave cabins across Jamaica, little is known about whether or not the lady behind the tale was real. The myth is that a younger, white woman, named Annie, married an older planter, not uncommon for the region. After a few years, the husband died, and, because the marriage was childless and there were no other heirs, the estate went to the wife. She was soon known and feared throughout the island as one of the cruelest mistresses ever to set foot in Jamaica. It was rumored that she was a Voodoo priestess, who used the darker side of that religion to force her male slaves into her bed.<sup>93</sup> One letter even accused her of forcing one of her African lovers into smothering her husband while she watched from the side of the bed.<sup>94</sup> After what was said about masters and their female slaves, it would not be difficult to see a strong-willed woman doing the same to her “property.” Simple influence can be more powerful than magic and religion. One freed slave, in his later age, stated that she would watch her overseer beating a slave to death, and stand there emotionless while the punishment she had commanded was given.<sup>95</sup> What many accounts agree on, though, is that Annie took a great interest in the workings of her plantation after her husband died. Even though she hired white, male overseers to help run the farm, she would don men's pants and ride the plantation herself to check on

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92 Mair, 177.

93 Henry, vi.

94 Anonymous, attributed to John Castello, *Legend of Rose Hall Estate, In the Parish of St. James, Jamaica*, 1868, The National Archives of Jamaica, MS 54a, pg. 9.

95 Ibid, 9.

the activities and to make sure it was working to her satisfaction.<sup>96</sup>

Rose Hall is an actual place, near Montego Bay, and it is one of the most beautiful and well-known of the remaining sugar plantation homes. Today, it is owned by a Miss U.S.A. pageant winner and her wealthy husband, a Mr. and Mrs. John Rollins, and is open for tours to the public, as well as weddings and other events. However, most of the business that surrounds the plantation is centered around Annie Palmer, and she remains one of the most famous slave owners in the world, whether the story is real or not. Tours are still given and people even claim to see her ghost roaming the halls of the “big house.” Ghost stories, whether historians believe them or not, are a part of a larger culture, and because of the story of Annie Palmer people know that women took part in plantation life as more than just wives and mothers. While we may not agree that a ghost tour and a rum punch is the best way to relate this history to the public, it is the way that Annie Palmer, and women like her, are remembered by people today.<sup>97</sup>

#### The Moral Struggle of White Female Slave Owners

Aside from the Annie Palmers of the Caribbean, some plantation mistresses were very kind to their slaves, or at least attempted to be. Such wives, like Ann Brodbelt, would speak to her servants and send their good wishes on to her daughter in England.<sup>98</sup> Whether to keep them working or keep them happy or soothe their own conscience, many women were dedicated to the health and well-being of the slaves.<sup>99</sup> They would provide better food and clothing for the Africans. Some of them would provide medical attention to those who were sick. However, for the elite women of Jamaica, most of their

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96 Henry, viii

97 <http://rosehall.com/explore/rose-hall-great-house.html>

98 Brodbelt, 62.

99 Clinton, 187.

helpful pursuits were not intended to be physically beneficial, but morally so. To the leisure class women of the time, this was enough, and they took on the education and religious instruction of many of their slaves. This is how many of them attempted to soothe their souls when it came to the struggle over owning slaves. Whatever they could use as a balm, they did.

Education was important to some elite, white women, and they felt that it was their duty to impart what little knowledge they had to others. This was more common among mistresses and indentured servants in the beginning of the colonial period in the Caribbean, since the indentured servants were guaranteed their freedom at some point. But after slavery became the main source of workers on the plantation, some slaves were given opportunities to learn for various reasons.

Elite white women were responsible for some of their own children's education, which might include teaching slave children at the same time. It was one of their most important duties, one that almost all of them took seriously. Classes usually took place in the morning, before the noon meal and afternoon naps. During that time, depending on the age of the children, basic lessons would be taught. For younger children, boys and girls would learn to read, write, and count together. Lady Nugent taught the small children around her to read and write when her schedule permitted it.<sup>100</sup> Once they grew older, boys were almost always shipped off to boarding schools. If the girls did not attend the same types of schools, then their lessons would be about music, advanced sewing, and maybe calligraphy or penmanship. For the younger children, these lessons were basic enough that one might find slave children in the class. Some women took

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100 Nugent, 79.

these children on willingly, others were “convinced” to add them to the classroom by their husbands. Why? If an elite white woman had a slave child in her classes, she would normally see that they were mulattoes, or the mixed children of their husband's affairs. Plantation owners would sometimes take great care to educate all of their children, white and mixed, even to the point of leaving their mulatto children money for an education in the wills of the owners.<sup>101</sup> However, if the children were living on the plantation, then they inevitably started their education with the master's white children, under the guidance of his wife, becoming even more intermingled. It is difficult to imagine white women teaching others, particularly since they had so few hours of study themselves. Occasionally, though, some slaves were taught to read, usually for one specific reason. Religion became one of the most important impacts that elite white women had on their slaves and servants.

In the southern United States, there was a similar tradition in the eighteenth century. For their own daughters, since the sons were usually educated in English boarding schools, they put a great deal of thought into stitching, dancing and languages.<sup>102</sup> All of these skills were extremely important to white elite women. However, what about other forms of education? What about other kinds of students? White women did not just teach their daughters the ways of being a good wife. Carole Berkin says that some plantation mistresses, such as Miss Eliza Lucas, taught two slave children to read and count while she was teaching her own siblings.<sup>103</sup> While teaching slaves to read was strictly prohibited by most states during the nineteenth century in the

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101 Mair, 174.

102 Berkin, 146.

103 Ibid, 130.

United States, these laws were never specified in Jamaica.

Religion was extremely important to the British in the Caribbean, just as it was to British women across the Empire. Many of these women focused their intellect on the teachings of the Bible. Catherine Hall notes that race played a very important role in the lives of the missionaries, even before they left Great Britain.<sup>104</sup> They were coming to the Caribbean to save the souls of the slaves, something that, at first, the slave owners did not mind because it gave the Africans hope for a good after life, even after the tough lives they would lead in the fields. The missionaries, particularly the female ones, thought that their greatest challenges would be teaching the “heathen” Africans about Christianity, and they made it their personal mission to convert as many as possible.

The first Englishmen and Englishwomen to arrive in the Caribbean were Anglicans, or those that followed and adhered to the Church of England. However, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was an explosion of splinter faiths. The people of these splinter groups believed that it was the duty of the British to become better, more faithful, more religious. Baptists and Methodists both took part in spreading the faith of the English to all parts of the British Empire. These same missionaries poured into Jamaica to save the souls of the planters, as well as the slaves. Baptists took a strong hold in the Caribbean, particularly in Jamaica.

While many of the planter elite “followed” some form of Christianity, on their own, they normally did not impart that sense of religious conviction to the people they felt they owned outright. They also met the missionaries and ministers with mixed feelings. Not only did they come in and talk about guilt and sin, but many elites believed

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104 Hall, 8.



that the Baptists fomented rebellion amongst the slave populations, including the rebellions of 1831 and 1865.<sup>105</sup> Some missionaries were turned out of Jamaica, but not all of them were forced to leave. It is true that many Baptist missionaries were abolitionists<sup>106</sup>, but how did they affect the planters they were attempting to reach? After years of fire and brimstone spewing from the pulpits, the moral heart strings of the masters and mistresses began to be softly tugged. Many missionaries expounded on the virtues of giving the hope of eternal life and bliss in heaven to slaves, since they knew that Africans were not likely to see anything similar on the earthly plane. Women tended to be the more religious of the household, and, therefore, convinced their husbands to help their slaves learn to read the Bible, and build churches for the Africans to attend. Many wives would raise the funds for these churches themselves, and then bring in the ministers to preach to their households.<sup>107</sup>

In Jamaica, slave rebellions occurred quite often, the result of food shortages, because foodstuffs had to be imported from other areas.<sup>108</sup> It behooved the owners to do some things to keep their slaves in line, whether out of Christian fellowship or just “good business” practices. This is why many of the wives began teaching slaves to read. Although many slave owners regretted this move in the later periods of rampant rebellion in the nineteenth century, teaching slaves to read the Bible became very important to many women. Even Lady Nugent taught her younger serving girls the Anglican catechisms, hoping they would retain that knowledge for the rest of their lives.<sup>109</sup>

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105 Ibid, 11.

106 Ibid, 12.

107 Ibid, 16.

108 Menard, 100.

109 Nugent, 72.

The Brodbelts felt that their young slaves benefited from their tutoring, believing that they lost their barbaric tendencies brought over from Africa, making them more obedient to Christ and their master. Each female in the Brodbelt family spent time educating a particular African child. The youngest daughter, Jane, was sent to finishing school in England, and with her went an entourage of black servants to care for her needs. Her mother, who wrote to Jane frequently, inquired after the young servant boy that accompanied her and how his lessons from Jane were going. She asks “How does Poll do? No doubt much improved by the lessons from his Mistress. I suppose he has intirely forgot the Negro dialect...”<sup>110</sup> For Jane's mother, the assumption is that with proper training, the African slave children will be more civilized than their parents, who were only “fit” to work in the fields. The new generation would be able to read and speak like the whites did, helping them to become better workers and better human beings.

For some white elite women, their religion and care of slaves were all they had. Since they had little to do with the business or political affairs of the island, religion, domesticity, and society were the only venues really open to them. Religion was the only thing that offered them salvation and equality in another life, a life more promising than the one they were leading at that moment. Women saw the conversion of their slaves as their duty, and one that had the benefit of being morally right. However, they were stuck between changing thoughts and attitudes toward slavery. On one hand, their faith preached that all men and women were brothers and sisters under God, blacks and whites, but, on the other, there was also the rise of studies that “proved” that Africans

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110 Brodbelt, 47.

were biologically different, lesser human beings.<sup>111</sup> While this did not reach every Englishman and woman until the 1850s, it did not just appear out of thin air. It took decades of contact with slaves, particularly in the Caribbean, for these feelings to become a way of life. White women in Jamaica were moving between these two thought processes and would switch back and forth on how they treated their slaves.<sup>112</sup>

This is a problem that women across the British Empire had. In the North American colonies, slavery was allowed in almost all the colonies, but was most prevalent in the southern colonies. Eventually, north of the Chesapeake, slavery died out on its own by the early nineteenth century. In the South, slavery thrived well into the middle of the nineteenth century. This meant that women on southern plantations also dwelt in the inner turmoil between being kind and gracious to their slaves and asserting their dominance over them, like their sisters in the Caribbean.<sup>113</sup> However, women in southern plantations felt responsible for the physical and spiritual care of their slaves, and they would keep an eye on them from the big house all the way to the slave quarters.<sup>114</sup> They felt, like the women on Caribbean plantations, that it was their duty to their husbands and that by lifting this burden, they were making themselves a useful partner on the plantation. Being a plantation mistress meant that southern plantation women had to decide what to do about the slaves under their supervision, and many of them picked up the reins of plantation management with only a few difficulties.<sup>115</sup>

Much more needs to be done to provide a full history of elite white women as

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111 Hall, 21.  
 112 Ibid, 22.  
 113 Clinton, 185.  
 114 Ibid, 18.  
 115 Ibid, 30-31.

Caribbean plantation mistresses. The ways white women interacted with their servants and slaves and how they managed being a plantation mistress is an area that is poorly understood. What has been determined here, though, is that women did take part in the running of the plantation. Many women kept account books for the farm, with lists of costs, supplies, products, and slaves. They worked hard to keep accurate figures of everything there. Additionally, many white mistresses took an active part in the lives of their slaves. Some plantation wives disciplined their slaves with the same viciousness as the male overseers, while others took to religion to teach their slaves obedience and the importance of giving their souls to Christ. Either way, while many historians claimed that these women languished in the heat and wilted instead of worked, evidence suggests that this was not always true, and that many of them worked hard to help their husbands maintain the family plantation.

### Chapter III:

#### The Elite Woman and Her Role in Creole Society

This chapter raises some questions and considerations for whether or not it was truly a “responsibility” or a “duty” of elite wives to be a member of high society. Can partying at the governor's house in Spanish Town until late be considered a burden of the English upper crust? Did the Maria Nugents of the English Caribbean embrace their roles as hostesses with gusto or with dismay? I believe it could be considered a burden for some, and that the women of seventeenth and eighteenth century Jamaica exemplified this idea. Almost every elite woman or plantation mistress had to make social appearances and play hostess to the important people on the islands. Why was that? For many, they were brought up and taught that this was the way things were. It was a charge given to them by fathers and husbands. Social events were part of the way men conducted business, therefore they needed their women to facilitate these events. This chapter argues that this was, in fact, a duty, and one that women considered both a blessing and a curse in their lives.

As we have seen, Jamaica already had a viable social structure when the English arrived. They merely replaced the Spaniards in society and the plantation economy with English men and women. From there, since a small element of Portuguese Jews were left behind and immediately surrendered to the English, it was easy for the conquerors to step in and develop a sense of continuity in the places the Spanish left behind.<sup>116</sup> It did not take very long for the newcomers to create their own Creole society. By the end of the seventeenth century, there was a booming economy on the island in sugar and in the

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116 Mair, 7.

trade of slaves, and with it came the trappings of fabulous wealth. This included fine clothes, great manors, and financial obligations for their families, including boarding school in England for the children and small endowments for illegitimate children. With Jamaica growing in importance to the British crown, more and more elites came to the island, creating a powerful social upper crust centered around the hierarchy put in place by the metropolitan government and headed up by a governor appointed by the same government. As Lady Nugent came to realize when she arrived in Jamaica, the social season seemed to center on her, since she lived in the finest house for dancing on the island.<sup>117</sup> Many elite women commented on spending time at the governor's mansion, even if Lady Nugent was not sure she wanted them there. As scholar Clare Taylor states, society “was often limited, dependent on the governor and his wife for some degree of elegance.”<sup>118</sup> Women like Maria Nugent were immediately thrown into the spotlight and expected to host the finest parties and entertainments. While many women would consider this a fun or exciting job, quite often, the governors' wives considered it a chore. It was a problem that Nugent understood to be part of her duty to her husband, but one that was difficult to cope with at times, as we shall see later.

“Society” was not just the people that these women spent their leisure time with. There was a great deal of work that went into preparing for social occasions, and all of this was handled by the women of the island. Historian Larry Gragg notes that “Conspicuous consumption befitted their place in society,” meaning that the elite wanted to be seen with the best of everything, and women put a great deal of effort into laying

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117 Ibid, 104.

118 Taylor, notebook, pg. 9

out the finest of food, drink and comforts for guests.<sup>119</sup> There were constant rounds of social visits, usually just a few people visiting the home of a planter or an officer's spouse. In town, these could be lunches and teas, but out in the sugar fields and in the homes of plantation owners, these could be week-long visits. An elite woman took a great deal of pride in her home and her hostessing skills. She would exhort her staff for weeks to work harder to prepare for such events and then pamper her guests with sumptuous meals and entertainment, provided in many cases by the musical talents of the daughters of the household.

The social season was eagerly anticipated by all elite women, even though different women had different reasons for getting excited. Younger, single ladies always awaited the social events for the opportunity to court eligible bachelors. This is where they could meet, mingle, and dance the night away with rich plantation owners and dashing young soldiers, many of whom were looking for a wealthy and healthy bride. Older women, including the wives of plantation owners and the officer elite, also looked forward to the whirlwind of social events. Most of them, but especially the planter wives, found that they spent most of their time on isolated plantations far away from other women and any kind of regular social interaction. For them, the social season allowed them to wine and dine with other white women. They could spend hours dancing and talking to their friends, something they reveled in and waited for all year long. Like the younger girls, they also used the social season to scout for eligible mates, but for their daughters. They spent ample time discussing the potential matches. Ann Brodbelt wrote to her daughter, Jane, that "Our gay time has just begun, and we are led to

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119 Gragg, title 176.

expect a pleasant Session...therefore we shall have an opportunity of seeing some of the Belles...should they be preferred by the Beaux to the present residents, I am fearful the loss of fine caps and scratched faces may be the result.”<sup>120</sup> Brodbelt was informing her daughter of her expectation of many flirtations and much gossip to follow each event in Spanish Town. It was something that she, and almost all other elite women, reveled in.

Women in the North American plantation colonies from the Chesapeake down to Georgia also lived on isolated farms and plantations far away from their friends and relatives. In a fashion similar to the women of Jamaica, they would also visit friends for several days or weeks when they made social calls and the social seasons of the larger port cities in the south, like Savannah, Charleston and Baltimore, were the highlights of some ladies' whole year. In addition to plantation estates and working farms in the country, the wealthiest built grand houses in the best districts of these cities, such as the Battery in Charleston, South Carolina. Almost every woman would prepare for her own dinner party, ball, or luncheon in these fine buildings. In the cooler winter months, many of the elites would travel to “town” and open their large and elaborate town homes for the events that were to come. It was such a large part of their lives, that many of these women would plan all year just for their wardrobes. Seamstresses were busy taking up or letting out the latest fashions from London and Paris for women who would wear them for one or two evening events. North American elite women also felt the pulls of obligation as they invited the upper echelons of the town to their elite gatherings. Many of them attempted to impress their guests with fine linens, ornately decorated rooms, and entertainment in the way of music or dancing. They were very similar to the ladies in the

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120 Brodbelt, 45.



Caribbean, and, like them, tried to establish a society with a great deal in common to the one they left behind or read about in England.<sup>121</sup> Drawing comparisons between the Jamaican elite women and elite women in other colonies, like those in North America, allows researchers to see how strong the desire was to be like the English gentry at home.

In India, there was a similar plantation economy, but the social structure did not have all of the same features. While many ladies did prepare for long visits in their “bungalow” plantations, when they went to town in places like Lucknow and Delhi, they were sequestered in the residencies on something similar to a military base. There would be social events and activities to attend, but they were more like officer balls with the soldiers being the primary guests. Women did participate in card games for the females and luncheons and teas, but it was more common for them to stay out in their plantations to avoid the bustle of an army installment. By the time the English in India had reached the height of their power in the nineteenth century, there was a more cemented social structure. More and more women would come to India and find a more genteel atmosphere, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, researchers like Chatterjee state that the land was still seen as wild and full of “savage” Indians by the English, so the husbands felt that it was more prudent to have their wives permanently locked away somewhere they deemed safe, such as their tea and cotton plantations far away in the Indian countryside.<sup>122</sup> This is something that elite women in the Caribbean would not have stood for. The island women desperately needed the social season to keep up social interactions.

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121 Norton, 8.

122 Chatterjee, 140.

Elite women in Jamaica put a great deal of preparation into planning their social visits and events. It was their duty to put on a good show. Of course after the loneliness that they constantly wrote of on the plantation, this was their chance to enjoy the company of others. However, entertainment was not the only reason to plan these events out. For wives, it was important to please their husbands, who used these events to either marry off eligible children and to shore up business dealings with other influential Englishmen. The men of the plantocracy knew their wives needed the time with their friends, but they were constantly attempting to plot out the details of gaining more power and prestige, as well as lining their pockets with more money to gain even more power and respect in England. Finally, it was also a chance for women to show their social status. Men were not the only ones who needed to show off their wealth. Women used this opportunity to do the same. Society and social contacts were very important in the world of the Caribbean elite, and men attempted to keep up these contacts through the activities of their wives. So yes, this was a duty that elite women had to perform, and this is how they did so.

#### The Plantation Mistress as Hostess, Or How to Host a Party At Home

Visits from friends or acquaintances were things that a plantation mistress would spend weeks preparing for because, more than likely, the visit would last more than a few days.<sup>123</sup> Not only would women have their own friends over, but also businessmen, officers, and sometimes even the governor and his family would stop in on a tour of the island. Lady Nugent gave birth to her first child on a grand tour of Jamaica's plantation

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123 Mair, 112.

homes.<sup>124</sup> On the surface, it seemed like a strictly social call of women to other women, but that is not always what it turned out to be. Entire families of friends and relatives would move in for weeks at a time, starting rounds of dinner parties, sewing circles, and play dates for children, each woman attempting to keep up relationships that seemed tenuous because of all the isolation between plantations.<sup>125</sup> The women would gather and talk and catch up about all the news of the island, and the men would go over business dealings and show off the productivity and inventiveness of the plantation fields and mills. However, for all of these visits, there was always an underlying agenda; something was needed by either the visitor or host that they thought could be gained through wining and dining. It was a delicate balance, hosting events and showing off the best of the family, and a responsibility that fell squarely onto the shoulders of the plantation mistress.

For plantation masters and mistresses with eligible daughters, the visits of the rich relatives were chances to showcase their children's talents and abilities that might make them suitable wives for other rich planters. Since many girls were not given an extensive formal academic education, they were trained in the domestic arts. Many were simply trained in music and needlepoint, but others were sent off to finishing schools in Britain, as explained in chapter one. When there were visitors, a lady could show off these skills and hope that the visitor might mention her to another family with an eligible bachelor. Other women would send their daughters off to another plantation mistress's home if she knew there would be visitors to divert and may be impressed by her daughter, like Ann

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124 Ibid, 102.

125 Ibid, 113.

Brodbelt did with her daughter Nancy, who was a frequent visitor in the wealthy Rickett household.<sup>126</sup> The afternoons were filled with practicing needle work in a drawing room with the windows open, if it was a nice day, quietly chatting with the other ladies. At night, the ladies would play any instruments the home had, or sing until it was time to retire for the evening. This would continue until the visit ended, but these were not the visits that most women looked forward to with bated breath. It was the tour of a new group of officers that really caught the eyes of many young ladies and would have them talking excitedly in low whispers for months to come.

A new group of officers meant a new batch of young men in the area that were straight from England and had the potential to move up in the ranks, and the local planters were always ready to foist their daughters off on a soldier with a promising future.<sup>127</sup> The soldiers were also not heavily influenced by the Creole culture yet, and the Creole man's habit of taking slaves as unwilling mistresses, as discussed in chapter two. An island tour was a way for soldiers to meet the elite plantocracy, who could influence pay and promotions with contacts in England. It also gave them a chance to become familiar with the areas they were there to protect. These soldiers were a big hit with the single women on Jamaica, and were always welcome in the homes of the plantocracy.<sup>128</sup> When they went on their island tours, the planters' daughters would perfect and put on their finest clothes and practice their music for days before their male guests would arrive. Once they did, the women, if they found one they approved of, would begin trying to look more attractive to the young man. Like in many other elite courtships, the

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126 Brodbelt, 114.

127 Mair, 104.

128 Ibid, 112.

daughter sought the approval of her parents, particularly her father, who controlled the inheritance and the dowry he would give his child out of it.

Many negotiations began in these small island tours, and so mothers and daughters tried to be completely prepared for them. It was important to have everything ready and in place. Some women would have marriage negotiations opened for them, and if they did not move quickly enough, the man would move on. Ann Brodbelt wrote to her daughter that “When your friend Dorothy left Jamaica it was rumoured abroad that she was to return...and to be married in some short time to her cousin, Mr Samuel Whitehorne, but no sooner was she sailed, than the young Gentleman took unto himself another Lady, who he fixed his affections upon...”<sup>129</sup> Men and women both moved quickly towards marriage, and with eligible men in short supply, one wrong move could mean that a woman was left waiting for another opportunity. Even if Mrs. Brodbelt thought that Dorothy would be better off waiting for someone less changeable in his love, she knew that this was a missed opportunity for the young woman.<sup>130</sup>

Creating these sorts of opportunities was where the duties of the plantation mistress crossed with those of an elite hostess. Elite women had to work very hard to complete both obligations. As stated in the previous chapter, the first preparation would be giving the house slaves and servants their chore list and corralling them into working to get the big house ready. If the goal was to impress potential in-laws or business associates, women took this duty to heart and tried to provide a clean and luxurious place for their guests to stay. Linens had to be washed, candles made, and the larders stocked

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129 Brodbelt, 61.

130 Ibid, 61.

with all the necessary provisions, including wine and brandy. By the middle of the seventeenth century, homes had gone from having cots thrown on the floor to feather beds that had to be fluffed and re-stuffed. It was a trying task for the lady of the house, but one that she took pride in because of her husband and her position. Why did she work so hard to create a hospitable atmosphere?

It was the duty of the plantation mistress to make sure that everything was perfect for her guests. Therefore, she felt it necessary to play an integral role in the preparations and would oversee the house servants and check every piece of china and silver for cleanliness, see to it that the beds were made in every room, and make sure that the kitchen was prepared for guests' every taste. Larry Gragg states that "...visitors often enjoyed the bounty of the planter's table."<sup>131</sup> For many, this meant pork, chicken, and fish for meats, and then a plethora of fruits, vegetables, stews, soups, and desserts. These could be dangerous to the health of the person partaking the meal, particularly if it was in the heat of the day when food could spoil or not settle well and make the eater sick, but it was too important to put on a good show for hostesses to care what happened after the meal.<sup>132</sup> They took pride in what they served their guests. Menus were always prepared in advance to make sure that the kitchen had all the necessary ingredients for supper parties. For visitors, they could expect the best out of the kitchen and at least one occasion when food and drink were lavished on them. Plantation mistresses and hostesses diligently prepared for this, making the actual hostessing seem effortless to the casual observer. Lady Nugent threw lavish parties during the season, and always made it

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131 Gragg, 176.

132 Taylor, 9.

seem easy. She never mentioned the work that went into it in her diary, only that people would come into the palace to see the elaborate affairs.<sup>133</sup> There was something for everyone, and it was all prepared by slave labor. Many mistresses found their slaves difficult to manage, but, with a mix of experience, discipline and direction, they would get the place ready for the guests, including the long-term visitors. And this was just the beginning as well. More than just the house needed to ready for guests.

In both the North American colonies and Indian colonies, elite white women worked to make their homes ready for visitors in much the same way. In southern colonies in North America, formal entertainment and elaborate parties were rare<sup>134</sup>, but to get ready women also had slaves to rely on. They oversaw the operations of the home, and had many of the same chore lists as the women in Jamaica and Barbados. The plantation homes all had to be taken care of, and while the hard work was done by slave labor, white mistresses managed all of the domestic servants. Women like Eliza Lucas began taking care of the house at the young age of sixteen, and her father trusted her not just with his other children, but trusted her to be a hostess and a part of his social circle. Therefore, she was always prepared for their home to be open to her father's acquaintances, and just like in the Caribbean, these displays were to show off the planter's wealth.<sup>135</sup> There is a key difference between Caribbean and North American mistresses, though. Catherine Clinton states that most gatherings were more “extraordinary” than activities in the towns and cities.<sup>136</sup> They had to be since this was their only chance to visit with their friends. American plantations could be many

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133 Nugent, 57.

134 Clinton, 177.

135 Ibid, 177.

136 Ibid, 178.

hundreds, even thousands of acres, so they could be miles from their nearest neighbors. Traveling to “town” was their only option for visiting their loved ones. Since they were such rare occasions, women would spend months preparing for them, creating incredibly elaborate events, something that Caribbean women did not concern themselves with as much. On a small island, it was not as difficult to travel to town or to hold small events every evening in Jamaica or to travel to see one's friends for a few days in Kingston or Spanish Town.

In India, women hurried their Indian servants around the house in much the same way that creole and North American colonial women ordered their slaves around. On the plantation, white women were rarely seen outside the home. They were meant to be inside, taking care of the house and managing the servants. To maintain a masculine presence on the farm, many husbands required this of their wives.<sup>137</sup> This, however, gave women a chance to practice and prepare their hostessing skills. Being ready at all times was the mark of a good elite hostess in India. When a high-ranking officer dropped in to visit a bungalow, his visit would always be marked by a fine meal and a comfortable bed, made ready by a household of servants.<sup>138</sup> Just like their sisters in the Caribbean, visits in both India and North America were meant to elicit good relations between elites who needed support, money, or just a good word whispered in the ear of friendly official back in the metropole, and women were a key component of this necessary custom.

After ensuring that their homes, families, and servants were ready for visitors, Jamaican women would take the time to prepare themselves. Since they saw it as their

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137 P. Chatterjee, 134.

138 Ibid, 126.



duty to impress their guests, they took a great deal of pride in what they looked like. This included trying on dresses and making sure that everything fit correctly. Fashion was not an important facet of life when the colonies were started. As the elites cemented their positions, though, fashion became just as much a statement of wealth and culture as the big plantation homes were. It was a way for both men and women to wear their money on their sleeves. Some house slaves had skills as seamstresses, so the ladies of the house would have their dresses fitted to show off their figure for dancing during the festivities. Some women took care of their own alterations because they did not trust local seamstresses. Since the latest fashions were always shipped over from Europe, many elite women did not approve of local workers, and would keep their own domestic slaves busy with sewing, and would take care of the minor details themselves.<sup>139</sup>

Even though a lot of effort went into having long-term visitors, elite women who lived in less isolated areas could expect any number of visitors, particularly women for teas and lunches. This is how they spread the local gossip, discussing everyone's favorite topics: adulterous men, mulatto children, and the newest arrivals of British soldiers. Gossip is how many women would gain information to pass to their husbands about potential problems coming up in town. Some women even used these small events to promote their own family businesses or potential financial propositions, and husbands were notorious for keeping up with their wives' schedules for just this purpose. Teas like this would allow for small, intimate conversations and tighter relationships between elite women. Those women that did have friends visited them in this way and found it easier to discuss the business of the day over these types of activities, rather than a large dinner

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139 Ibid, 127

party or formal ball that would keep everyone distracted all night.<sup>140</sup>

Lady Maria Nugent was on a tour of the island of Jamaica while pregnant with her first child, and would stop for several weeks trying to gather her strength as she tried to cope with a pregnancy in a tropical climate. As the wife of the governor, she felt it necessary to meet and cultivate friendly relationships with the men and women of the planter elite.<sup>141</sup> A tour allowed her husband to do much of what new soldiers did when they came to the island; meet the neighbors and see the land. Since they spent so much time on each plantation, this tour took months; so much time, in fact, that the Nugents' first child was born in a planter's home far away from the governor's mansion in Kingston.<sup>142</sup> Maria also participated in these tours in her own right by spending time with the plantation mistresses and listening to what they had to say. This is how Lady Nugent learned a great deal about the women of the Caribbean and she wrote most of what she observed and thought in her diary. In her travels around Jamaica, she wrote about how these women spent their afternoons either sewing or resting in dark rooms, attempting to keep out of the heat. Her experiences in the governor's mansion, hosting her own parties, are also interesting, but we will return to those later.

The home and family were very important to elite women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They took great pride in the appearance of their plantation houses, and having visitors allowed them to show off this pride, as well as the trappings of wealth that they and their husbands had accumulated. Great rooms, fine food, and exquisite entertainment seem like fun and easy to plan, but they were truly finely

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140 Chatterjee, 135.

141 Nugent, 45.

142 Ibid, 86.

orchestrated performances that allowed elite women to show off their skills to those they meant to impress. Hospitality meant far more than just entertaining guests, it was about cementing friendships that would be helpful in the future.<sup>143</sup> Husbands depended on their wives to keep these activities luxurious, yet tasteful, and they had much to gain or lose in these visits. Although women did get some enjoyment from visiting with friends, they knew it was their duty to see and be seen. The hostessing duties played a significant part in the lives of women and as they opened their homes; they were, hopefully, opening them and their husbands up for new opportunities in the British mercantile world.

#### The Duties of an Elite Woman During the Social Season

For women, visitors were only a part of the daily life of the plantation household. Elite women also had a duty to participate in the social season in the towns of the Caribbean. What was the social season? In the summer, during the bulk of the growing season, women were needed on the plantations with their husbands to run the home. In the winter, though, the big houses were closed up and many families would move into a town home. For this reason, it was easier to have social gatherings with everyone's friends while they were all in town, hence the social season had begun. Many women looked forward fondly to the balls that would last until four in the morning, and eagerly anticipated seeing the new elites or soldiers in the area. For many, particularly those in extremely isolated areas, this was their only opportunity to spend time with other white people, something they sorely missed in the months they were on their plantation. For Ann Brodbelt, the "belles" would come to Spanish Town from all over the island to see and be seen, and the "beaux" would come to look at the ladies, hoping to find a suitable

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143 Gragg, 177.

future bride.<sup>144</sup> She wrote to her daughter of all the fashions and parties and the pairings that would come of the season. For all, it was a chance to be refined and to show off refinement to impress the important men, and sometimes, women of the town.

Most of the personal information that we have on the social life of Jamaica centers on the governor's home. The governor split his time between the two most populous cities on the island, Kingston, in St. Andrew's Parish, and Spanish Town, in St. Catherine's Parish. Spanish Town was one of the cities that the English took over from the Spanish in 1655 and was already a bustling community. It held many of the government offices until it was partially destroyed by an earthquake, and the area was in the process of being rebuilt when Kingston was founded. Kingston became a thriving port town in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, after an earthquake wiped out the previous capital, Port Royal. Even though Spanish Town vied for the right to be the next capital, Kingston was already so busy that it was seen as the financial capital of the island. Both towns retained a great deal of British officials, though, meaning that both of these towns had busy social scenes, and many of the elites had fine and elaborate homes in either one or the other, and sometimes both, for the social seasons.

It was the governor who threw the most elaborate parties. Thousands of pounds were spent making the governor's home, known as King's House in Spanish Town, one of the most beautiful on the island.<sup>145</sup> With the governor appointed by the Crown, he and his wife were automatically the most important people in Jamaica, and many vied for

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144 Brodbelt, 45.

145 Mair, 101.

their favor, hoping to gain something of value back in Britain. Favors and promises were not the only things that the planter elite wanted from their governors. Lucille Mathurin Mair notes that while some planters disdained the system of support in return for good words back in England, nearly all planters looked to mimic the governor and his wife in their manners and dress.<sup>146</sup> In this way, imitation of new people from England made the elite feel more British than creole, something they all aspired to. The governor and his wife were watched closely, and, for whoever happened to be in the position, this was both a blessing and a curse.<sup>147</sup> The governor needed the support of the local elites, but the wife had to suffer the strain of being the perfect hostess at all times. While some of the elite women would tolerate certain eccentricities in the lady living in King's house, such as peculiar manners or being surrounded by hand-picked friends during her private time, they would not tolerate being ignored when it came to social events.<sup>148</sup> It was too important to be seen as important to all. They wanted to see the governor's wife, and she needed to be mostly accessible to them.

Lady Nugent knew that inviting the elite of the island into her new home was one of her first tasks when they arrived in Spanish Town. Her duty was to entertain and impress the elites of the island because her husband's success as governor depended on the support of these people. She noted that one of her first dinner parties was attended by many, and that the door to the governor's mansion was thrown open to everyone. Even the poor people of Kingston, both white and black, made an appearance, and Lady

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146 Ibid, 102.

147 Nugent, 45

148 Mair, 104.

Nugent was disconcerted to see them watching her eat during the event.<sup>149</sup> However, it was her duty to be as nonchalant in the chaos as possible, and being an elite woman had given her the training to do so and make her husband, Lord George Nugent, very proud. Mair states that Nugent had to do more than just make an appearance at dinner parties; for some creoles, she was the closest they were going to get to having a “royal family” and she needed act the part perfectly.<sup>150</sup> In addition to military reviews and island tours, it was necessary for her to be a grand hostess, to the point of even wearing a tiara at a reception in her honor in Spanish Town.<sup>151</sup>

For the women of the Caribbean, it was a chance to show off their fine European clothing and impress the rest of the gentry while not thinking about the slave rebellions and attempted rebellions that ravaged the island throughout the seventeenth century. A little time to be carefree, even under the eyes of their watchful peers, was always a welcome change of pace for the women of any society, particularly the women of Jamaica. Carefree times were important, but it was also the woman's duty to make sure that these gatherings went off perfectly.

In other areas of the British Empire, the social season had similar meanings. It was a chance for the elite to gather and exchange gossip and pleasantries, as well as information for promotions and royal compensations. In southern cities in the North American colonies, women like Eliza Lucas would attend grand balls in the Battery of Charleston, South Carolina until the wee hours of the morning. Charleston was one of the largest cities in North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and

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149 Nugent, 45.

150 Mair, 102.

151 Nugent, 41.

many elites traveled there in the winter for business and pleasure. In the summer, the city was rife with yellow fever, and its grand houses empty as the wealthy escaped the pestilential area for their safer farms up river and along the coast. During that time, the social season was practically non-existent, but it was not always like that.

In the winter, the city was buzzing with activity along the Ashley and Cooper Rivers in the great homes of the elite, and the Christmas season always kept the women with teas, dances and lunches.<sup>152</sup> Lucas usually commented that that was her chance to visit with other women without having to discuss the business of being a plantation mistress.<sup>153</sup> She relished these opportunities to talk to other women about “female” matters, such as sewing, children, fashion, and gossip. It gave her the opportunity to be the woman she was expected to be: feminine, graceful, dutiful, a chance rarely given to her as she ran her father's large plantation in his frequent absences. Along with visits with female friends, these women also spent time surveying the local boys who were getting to a marriageable age, and many young ladies commented on the “beaux” who would make the dances fun and exciting for single ladies.<sup>154</sup> There was always someone new and exciting to talk to and meet and dance with at these events.

In India, what the women there considered the “social season” was very different. Here, the rounds of events did not revolve around holidays on the calendar. The English elite in India had other problems to deal with, the biggest one being monsoon season. When there were torrential downpours for months out of the year, it was very difficult to plan parties or social gatherings. After the rain finally stopped, any society functions

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152 Clinton, 177.

153 Berkin, 210.

154 Clinton, 178.

took place in the residencies, or military installations that turned into self-sufficient communities to keep the white women in and the Indians out. Just like women in other British colonies, the white women in the residencies of India had a duty to their husbands to be gracious hostesses and refined guests at any party. While it was the husband's duty to put forth a strong, masculine image, it was the wife's duty to share in the responsibility to make good impressions on those in charge to further their family's ambitions.<sup>155</sup> For many elite women, India was a temporary stop on the way up the social ladder, and to get further up, they needed to curry the favor of the highest authorities in Imperial India. However, with fewer elite white women making the trip to India, cultivating friendships was very important to the planter women there. In the residencies, they would have their own parties with just women, and even game nights for women who enjoyed the feminine card games, like bridge.<sup>156</sup> In India, the need to create long-lasting friendships was deemed absolutely necessary in a land so strange and different from their home.

It was very important for all elite women to have excellent hostessing skills, as well as the ability to be a gracious guest during the social season. Their duty was to make a good impression on those higher up in the pecking order so that their own families would reap the benefits. In Jamaica, like India, many elite women saw their time in the tropics as a temporary stop on the way to more success, wealth, and power. To do that, the Caribbean women attempted to re-create a social circle very similar to the one they thought existed in England. However, as much as creole women wanted to believe they were in the metropole, it was impossible to have an exact replica. Larry

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155 P. Chatterjee, 127.

156 Ibid, 127.



Gragg makes an important distinction about creole society: Even as they enjoyed recent fashions and ever more comfortable and well-appointed homes, indulged in the conspicuous pleasures of hospitable gatherings, married and started families, and acknowledged the hierarchical society in which they lived through word and deed, the English planters of Barbados knew that they had not truly created a 'little England...'<sup>157</sup>

This held just as true for the British women in Jamaica. Women had a difficult task ahead of them when it came to the social season in the Caribbean, but it was one that they looked on fondly for a chance of fellowship with other elite white women, something that they did not get to do very often. Like women in the North American colonies, and India, women in Jamaica wanted a chance to visit with women that were like them. Whether that included playing games or hosting a dinner and dance, they needed these opportunities to “play” and not be a stern mother or plantation mistress for a little while. More importantly, though, it was their duty to create a warm and hospitable environment, one that showed off the power and prestige of their husbands and impressed their friends and neighbors with their wealth and refinement. In both areas, the social season and social visits were some of the most important chances for an elite woman to make her mark on the British islands of the Caribbean.

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157 Gragg, 181.

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