

THE WORLD AN ABSENTEE PLANTER AND HIS SLAVES MADE: SIR WILLIAM STAPLETON AND HIS NEVIS SUGAR ESTATE, 1722–1740*

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Absentee Caribbean sugar planters epitomized a phenomenon characteristic of the early eighteenth-century British-American world that we might term 'aristocratic capitalism'.¹ Manipulating considerable resources and a sizable labour force in an endeavour that combined agriculture and industry, they were leading players in the burgeoning Atlantic market economy.² Yet, despite the undoubted success of their enterprise, absentees were also victims of contradictions which define this phase of commercial activity. Scrambling to span two geographical worlds, long-distance proprietors occupied as uneasy half-way house between the perceived 'gold mine' profitability of earlier New World exploitation and the much lower, but possibly more stable, rates of return associated with the mature sugar plantation economy.³ Exacerbating their dilemma and limiting their room for

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¹ In one recent study Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan use P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins's notion of 'gentlemanly capitalism' to describe the economic structures and values prevailing in both England and its colonies during the eighteenth century. For reasons that should be apparent later, I would suggest that the term 'aristocratic capitalism' is more apt when discussing conditions in the early part of the century, especially in the Caribbean. See 'Introduction' in *Strangers within the realm: cultural margins of the first British Empire*, eds., B. Bailyn and P.D. Morgan (Chapel Hill: North Carolina U.P., 1991), 13–14; and P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, 'Gentlemanly capitalism and British expansion overseas, I: the old colonial system', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., xxxix (1986), 501–25.

² The literature on absentee planters and the Caribbean sugar economy is, of course, voluminous. But, see especially, Lowell J. Ragatz, 'Absentee landlordism in the British Caribbean, 1750–1833', *Agricultural History*, v (1931), 7–26; Ragatz, *The fall of the planter class in the British Caribbean, 1700–1763* (New York: Octagon Press, 1963); Frank W. Pitman, *The development of the British West Indies, 1700–1763* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1917); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and slavery* (London: André Deutsch, 1944); Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and slaves: the rise of the planter class in the English West Indies* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina U.P., 1973); Richard B. Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery: an economic history of the British West Indies, 1623–1775* (Barbados: Caribbean U.P., 1974); and B.L. Solow and S.L. Engerman (eds.), *British capitalism and Caribbean slavery: the legacy of Eric Williams* (Cambridge: University Press, 1987).

³ On rates of return, see J.R. Ward, 'The profitability of sugar planting in the British West Indies, 1650–1834', *Journal of Economic History*, 31 (1978), 197–213.

manoeuvre, they were equally transitional between older forms of economic organization centring upon the patriarchal household – forms that arguably persisted longer on the Caribbean fringe of empire than in the metropolis – and the progressive modes of commercial activity that led to the professionalization of estate management, in England and on the periphery, by the late eighteenth century.⁴

After 1750, as J.R. Ward and others have suggested, innovation and improvement became the order of the day. Beset by adverse economic conditions and mounting humanitarian pressure, some absentees at least tightened up management practices, adopted new agricultural techniques, and embraced technological change during the Era of Amelioration. And, as a result of these changes, their plantations remained as profitable as those of their resident-controlled neighbours', while their slaves became the beneficiaries of improved material conditions and treatment.⁵

But, as Ward acknowledges, improvement was not really an option for absentees earlier in the century, not least because their perceptual field was substantially different from that of their successors.⁶ Aristocratic structures and values predating England's commercial revolution still exercised a tenacious grip and were not easily reconciled with the demands of bourgeois capitalism. This tension was both heightened and symbolized by their determination to sustain a metropolitan lifestyle, and to use the revenue wrung from their West Indian plantations to do so. Most significantly, absentees were unable to reconcile their conviction that these estates ought to be 'gold mines' with the steadily accumulating evidence that, in terms of rates of return, sugar plantations were more analogous to the agricultural enterprises of North America than the extractive industries of Latin America, and would require equally careful and systematic cultivation and an eye for the long term.⁷

These contradictions helped shape the world absentee planters made in the early eighteenth-century Caribbean, not least in terms of how they managed their estates. First, and perhaps most signally, their transitional status meant that their plantations would continue to be run like quasi-feudal fiefdoms, via a chain of command that incorporated trusted kin, clients, and servants acting as attornies, managers, and overseers. In the novel context of overseas empire, however, this clientage network resulted in communication problems that plagued proprietors and their employees, hampered effective estate management, and arguably led to that wholesale abandon-

⁴ See Michael Craton, 'Reluctant Creoles: the planters' world in the British West Indies' in Bailyn and Morgan (eds.), *Strangers within the realm*, 314–62.

⁵ J.R. Ward, *British West Indian slavery: the process of amelioration, 1750–1834* (Oxford: University Press, 1989).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8–37.

⁷ Ward, 'The profitability of sugar planting'; and *British West Indian slavery*.

ment of resident status that, for good or ill, played a prominent part in moulding West Indian society.⁸ Secondly, tragically, the one group excluded from this trans-Atlantic extended household by dint of status and race were, of course, the slave labourers. Victims of a brutal, exploitative regime, they were subjected to severe treatment devoid of any paternalistic impulse or any of the ameliorating features of 'improving' landlordism.

This, then, was the universe early eighteenth-century absentees, their clients, and their slaves inhabited. This essay analyses one world – the Stapleton family's Jennings and Balls Range estate on Nevis in the Leewards.⁹ One aim is to delineate how its transitional status resulted in a system of endless frustration for and inadequate communication between Stapleton and his managers; with negative consequences for both the plantation economy and its human dimension, the slaves. But I also want to assess the precise consequences of absenteeism for all concerned in a distinctive context – that of a semi-marginal island during the turbulent years of the 1720s and 1730s, an era of stagnation, recession, and partial recovery made worse by growing competition from rival English and French sugar producers.¹⁰ Under these challenging circumstances, did proprietors make any effort whatsoever to alter the management of their plantations? Were they, as has been traditionally charged, still

⁸ On the debate over the macrocosmic socio-economic effects of absenteeism, see Ragatz, 'Absentee landlordism in the British Caribbean'; Pitman, *The development of the British West Indies*; Williams, *Capitalism and slavery*; Orlando Patterson, *The sociology of slavery: an analysis of the origins, development, and structure of Negro slave society in Jamaica* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1967). Among scholars adopting a more positive perspective are Douglas G. Hall, 'Absentee-proprietorship in the British West Indies, to about 1850', *The Jamaican Historical Review*, iv (1964), 15–35; Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery*, 385–7; Elsa V. Goveia, *Slave society in the British Leeward Islands at the end of the eighteenth century* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1965); and Edward Brathwaite, *The development of Creole society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (Oxford: University Press, 1971).

⁹ The principal sources for this study are the Stapleton MSS deposited at the John Rylands Library, Manchester, in 1951. They include letters from Sir William Stapleton to his attorneys in the Caribbean; correspondence with his London agents, the Butler family; letters from his plantation managers; plantation and sugar accounts; and slave inventories. Extracts from Stapleton's correspondence, contained in a letterbook held by Harvard College Library, have already been published. But the letterbook is incomplete and ends prematurely in 1732. See Edwin F. Gay (ed.), 'Notes and documents: letters from a sugar plantation in Nevis, 1723–1732', *Journal of Economic and Business History*, i (1928), 149–73. Among the many other works concentrating on individual Caribbean sugar estates are Richard Pares, *A West-Indian fortune* (London: Longmans, 1950); Michael Craton and James Walvin, *A Jamaican plantation: the history of Worthy Park, 1670–1970* (London: W.H. Allen, 1970); Craton, *Searching for the invisible man: slaves and plantation life in Jamaica* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1978); Richard S. Dunn, 'A tale of two plantations: slave life at Mesopotamia in Jamaica and Mount Airy in Virginia', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 34 (1977), 32–65; Dunn, "'Dreadful idlers" in the cane fields: the slave labor pattern on a Jamaican sugar estate, 1762–1831' in B.L. Solow and S.L. Engerman (eds.), *British capitalism and Caribbean slavery*, 163–90; and Mary Butler, 'Mortality and labour on the Codrington estates, Barbados', *Journal of Caribbean History*, 19 (1984), 48–67.

¹⁰ On conditions in the Caribbean during the 1720s and 1730s, see Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery*, 415–43.

inclined to pursue short-term profit at the expense of the long-term deterioration of their estates? How productive and profitable were such plantations anyway following the early boom years? What were the principal results of long-distance proprietorship for the slaves? And how much scope did they have to shape their living conditions, even fashion a cultural identity? Though not necessarily representative, this case study does shed fresh light on the debate over absenteeism by focusing on an important, yet neglected stage of development on the road to the mature sugar plantation economy of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Caribbean.¹¹

With their influential contacts, relatively easy access to initial capital, and smooth ascension into the gubernatorial stratum, the Stapletons were more akin to powerful, leading West Indian families like the Willoughbys, Codringtons or Modyfords than to the Pinneys of Nevis studied by Richard Pares.¹² They owed their fortune principally to the efforts of the dynasty's founder, the first William Stapleton. Among the Royalists gaining favour at the Restoration, he had migrated to the Caribbean during the 1660s. Taking advantage of his military ability, Stapleton rose rapidly in a fluid social environment to become governor-general of the Leeward Islands. An energetic administrator, he worked hard to encourage the nascent sugar industry. But, like other officeholders, Stapleton did not neglect his own interest. He married into the Russell family, the largest planters on Nevis, and acquired substantial properties in all four Leeward Islands by exploiting his privileged access to the patenting process.¹³ Following Sir William's death in 1686, his heirs increased the family's holdings further. The third baronet played a vital role through his marriage to his first cousin, Frances, co-heiress to the entire Russell estate. However, with his premature death in 1699, the Stapletons' residence in the Leewards came to an abrupt halt. Perhaps because of the climate, their childrens' schooling, or a desire to avoid eager provincial suitors, the two women left heading the family – Dames Anne and Frances – migrated to England. With this move, the Stapleton family joined the growing ranks of absentee proprietors. They never returned to the Caribbean.¹⁴

¹¹ Philip D. Morgan has suggested that the early eighteenth century is 'perhaps *the Darkest Age of the many Dark Ages of Caribbean history*'. Personal communication with author, 30 October 1991.

¹² I would like to thank Michael Craton for his help in placing the Stapleton family in comparative perspective. For the Pinneys, see Pares, *A West-India fortune*.

¹³ On the founder of the Stapleton fortune, see J.R.V. Johnson, 'The Stapleton sugar plantations in the Leeward Islands', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, xlviii (1965–66), 175–206, especially 176–80; C.S.S. Higham, *The development of the Leeward Islands under the Restoration: a study of the foundations of the old colonial system* (Cambridge: University Press, 1921), 88–9, 212–217; Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and slaves*, 124–5; and Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery*, 164–5.

¹⁴ On Sir William's successors and the family's removal to England, see Johnson, 'The Stapleton sugar plantations', 180–2.

Obtaining his West Indian plantations by inheritance, not by his own labour, the third baronet's eldest son, William, therefore epitomized a privileged subspecies of absentee. Educated at Christ Church, Oxford, he joined the ranks of the English aristocracy through an astute marriage to the Earl of Westmoreland's granddaughter. Assisted by his new family connections and following a course favoured by other prominent long-distance proprietors, Stapleton then entered politics. He became Tory MP for Oxfordshire in 1727 and remained so until his death in 1740. Returned unopposed, he consistently voted against the Walpole administration and predictably used his influence to defend the West Indian interest. In his only recorded speech during discussion of a bill for the relief of the sugar colonies in 1733, he successfully opposed the importation of rum from North America into Ireland. And he was the only unofficial member of the committee appointed to draft the Molasses Act.¹⁵ Not otherwise renowned for his vigour as an MP, Stapleton seemingly conformed to the stereotype of the dissolute, spendthrift absentee planter. A former tutor described him as a 'rake' during the 1727 election campaign and ten years later rumours circulated on Nevis that he was contemplating selling his slaves to pay off outstanding gambling debts. On several occasions Stapleton was forced to borrow considerable sums from his mother and still owed her £2,640 when she died.¹⁶ But despite (or possibly because of) his extravagance, he retained a dogged grip over the management of his West Indian legacy after assuming direct control in the early 1720s.

Sir William devoted particular attention to the Stapleton family's 'jewel in the crown', the old home plantation of Jennings and Balls Range in the Parish of St John Figtree, Nevis.¹⁷ Purchased in 1678 by Governor Stapleton, Jennings and Balls Range originally covered 532 acres. But, as the sugar boom took off, the family enlarged it still further by purchasing adjoining tracts from failing smallholders.¹⁸ The plantation, as finally constituted, was ideally situated and appointed. Stretching from the south-western coast up the side of Nevis mountain, the estate encompassed both lowland and upland terrain. This meant that the Stapletons could produce

¹⁵ For details of Sir William's early life and marriage, see *ibid.*, 182, 185. Information on his political career is contained in Romney Sedgwick, *The House of Commons, 1715-1754*, 2 vols (London: HMSO, 1970), i, 302; ii, 441-2. Interestingly, Sir William Stapleton is omitted from the list of M.P.s holding West Indian estates in i, 153.

¹⁶ The tutor is quoted in *ibid.*, ii, 442; for the rumours concerning gambling debts, see David Stalker to William Stapleton, Nevis, July 26, 1737, Rylands Stapleton MS 4/10; details of Stapleton's transactions with his mother are contained in Ryl. Stapleton MS 13.

¹⁷ Though Sheridan assumes that another estate - Russells Rest - is the focus of the collection, Johnson argues that the plantation referred to is Jennings and Balls Range and all the evidence in the Rylands Stapleton MS and the companion Stapleton-Cotton MSS at University College, Bangor, points in that direction. See Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery*, 165; and Johnson, 'The Stapleton sugar plantations', 178-9, 182, 185-6.

¹⁸ Ryl. Stapleton MS 2/1; Johnson, 'The Stapleton sugar plantations', 179.

some mountain sugar which, because it ripened early, often attracted higher prices on the London market.¹⁹ Also, the plantation was endowed with two sugar works – a rather delapidated one in the lowlands and a more extensive establishment on the mountain slopes.²⁰ This arrangement facilitated the harvest as the slaves did not have to haul cut canes a vast distance to the mill. Finally, with the colony's port of entry – Charlestown – just two miles to the north, the processed sugar could be shipped easily and supplies and provisions were readily available.²¹

Despite its advantages, however, Jennings and Balls Range was not isolated from the swirling currents of Nevis's volatile early history.²² When the Stapletons acquired the estate, the island was the most prosperous and successful of the British Leewards. A combination of factors – its good shipping and trading facilities, its escape from the French invasion of 1666–67, the decision of the Royal African Company to establish its factory there – had ensured that Nevis preceded its neighbours in the development of a viable sugar industry. Under these favourable circumstances Jennings and Balls Range thrived and, because of the Stapletons' connections, lay in the vanguard of Nevis's economic development. But the tide turned for both the island and plantation during the final years of the seventeenth century. Conforming to the pattern of rise and decline characteristic of the Caribbean, Nevis began to lose ground to the other Leewards, especially the significantly larger Antigua. Almost simultaneously, the white population shrank as a result of a fever epidemic. Finally, the island's privileged position as a slave entrepôt evaporated with the ending of the Royal African Company's monopoly in 1698. From being the premier of the Leewards, Nevis slumped to become, according to the Reverend Robert Robertson, writing in the early 1730s, 'within these twenty Years . . . the least considerable . . .'²³ Jennings and Balls Range inevitably shared in this general decline. Just as the Stapletons chose to become absentees, stagnation set in.

The estate consequently received a more direct blow during the devastating French raid of March 1706. Stapleton's plantation was particularly hard hit during the assault. Lying immediately in the invaders' path, it lost 147 out of 183 slaves, the mansion-house, sugar works, and several acres of canes and ratoons.²⁴ Only a slow

¹⁹ On the impact of drought in Nevis and the importance of not relying solely on the lowlands, see Ward, *British West India slavery*, 79–80; for an interesting discussion of the relative merits of lowland and mountain sugar, see Richard Pares, *A West-Indian fortune*, 104–5.

²⁰ 'An inventory of negroes, stock, buildings and planta. utensils etc. on ye estate of the honble Sir William Stapleton Bart., 1734', Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3.

²¹ Johnson, 'The Stapleton sugar plantations', 179.

²² For a good description of Nevis's early history, see Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery*, 161–4.

²³ Robert Robertson, *A supplement to the detection of the state and situation of the present sugar planters of Barbados and the Leeward Islands* (London: J. Wilford, 1733), 83.

²⁴ 'Letters and papers concerning losses in the French invasion of 1706', Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/13; Johnson, 'The Stapleton sugar plantations', 182.

recovery ensued. Setting the pattern that was to characterize Stapleton's own tenure, the acting trustee, Dame Anne, was reluctant to invest the capital necessary to restock the plantation. Jennings and Balls Range even seems to have shrunk in size during this period. Over 600 acres in 1700, it had declined to 500 when surveyed professionally for the first time in 1734.²⁵ Hence this once prime estate was 'in a decaying condition' when twenty-four-year-old William Stapleton finally took charge in July 1722.²⁶

His principal task was to decide how best to manage the plantation and stimulate its revival. Initially, he toyed with the idea of migrating to the West Indies and running his affairs personally. But his mother, familiar with the rigours of a planter's life, counselled against that course of action and Stapleton elected to remain an absentee.²⁷ This decision meant that, whilst influencing the parameters of activity, he would not be in a position to shape the plantation world directly; instead his instructions would be filtered through a management hierarchy and interpreted, as well as enforced, by subordinates in the Caribbean. As was customary in the eighteenth century, ultimate responsibility for supervising Jennings and Balls Range in the owner's absence was vested in a group of resident attornies – Timothy Tyrell, James Symonds, and Colonels Abbott and Smith. To ensure prompt compliance with his directions and the minimum of misunderstanding, they were trusted friends and relatives bound by ties of obligation, patronage and kinship to the Stapleton interest. The relationship between them and the absentee proprietor was therefore familial, not pecuniary; indeed there is no evidence that they were ever paid for the tasks they performed. Once appointed these attornies assumed control over Stapleton's financial and commercial activities in the Leewards and assisted in making the crucial long-term decisions regarding his landed properties.²⁸

Their first duty was to appoint a manager for Jennings and Balls Range, the salaried employee responsible for the day-to-day running of the estate.²⁹ The attornies could not reach agreement on

²⁵ This may have been because ninety acres leased out to Richard Spencer had been overlooked. Charles Pym to William Stapleton, St Kitts, 5 September, 1734, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/9; 'Indenture', 20 June, 1730, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/14; Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 6 August 1730, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5.

²⁶ William Stapleton to his attornies, 10 July 1722, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/1.

²⁷ William Stapleton to his attornies, 10 July 1722, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/1.

²⁸ The attornies' names are given in Timothy Tyrell to William Stapleton, 18 June, 1722 Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/11. For the selection and role of attornies in the early eighteenth century, see Robert Robertson, *A letter to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of London, from an inhabitant of His Majesty's Leeward-Caribbee-islands* (London: J. Wilford, 1730), 85-6.

²⁹ On the importance of the manager of a Caribbean plantation, see Pares, *A West-India fortune*, 135. As Walter Nisbet wrote to Lady Catherine Stapleton in 1783: 'A West India Estate may be properly compared to a Manufacture; the profits of which, depend entirely on the knowledge, experience, and industry of the Manufacturer; and without these necessary requisites in a Manger, it becomes . . . a sinking-fund'. Stapleton-Cotton MS 18/5. For the limits within which a manager typically had to operate, see Walter Nisbet to Catherine Stapleton, September [n.d.], 1783, Stapleton-Cotton MS 17/1.

a candidate, however, and a bitter controversy arose that encompassed all parties associated with the plantation. Timothy Tyrell, Stapleton's cousin, advocated replacing the current manager, John Kitt, with Joseph Herbert, owner of a nearby estate and a 'very honest industrious man'. But James Symonds felt that his client, Kitt, should stay assisted by two new white servants. After considering advice from English acquaintances that he select an experienced manager from Barbados, Stapleton eventually approved Herbert's appointment, a decision that strained his relationship with Symonds. It also generated discontent among another group with a keen interest in the outcome – the slaves. Perhaps fearing an increased workload and always keen to exploit divisions within the white community, they had visited Tyrell in early 1723 and swore that if Herbert was put on the plantation 'they woud all run away'. Confronted with such a serious threat, Tyrell adopted a carrot-and-stick approach whilst offering little in the way of real concessions. Reassuring them that they would not be ill-treated, he insisted 'they shou'd obey whoever we put on [as] Manager or else be severely punished'. After Tyrell's warning, unrest waned. But Stapleton had received an early indication of two problems associated with absenteeism – the likelihood of tension within the white hierarchy and the ever-present threat of slave indiscipline. In this instance, as happened so often, they fed off each other.³⁰

These were problems that Stapleton could ill afford, for, whilst making decisions about key personnel, he was also receiving disheartening information about the plantation's condition. According to his attornies, Jennings and Balls Range was in a rundown state: it was seriously undermanned; few canes had been planted even given the size of the active labour force; the sugar works were in need of repair; provisions were scarce, necessitating an immediate outlay; and the slaves lacked clothing.³¹ Stapleton and his subordinates faced a difficult task for, as Timothy Tyrell asserted: 'When a large plantation is once out of order it requires a great deal of care and

³⁰ Timothy Tyrell to William Stapleton, 18 June, 1722, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/11. A Joseph Herbert is recorded as living in St John Figtree Parish during the 1720s and 1730s. See Vere Langford Oliver (ed.), *Caribbeana, being miscellaneous papers relating to the history, genealogy, topography, and antiquities of the British West Indies*, 6 vols (London: Mitchell, Hughes and Clarke, 1909–19), i, 145. For further details of the controversy, see James Symonds to William Stapleton, 23 June 1722, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/14; William Stapleton to Timothy Tyrell, 16 August 1722, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/1; Timothy Tyrell to William Stapleton, 1 June 1723, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/11; James Symonds to William Stapleton, 29 June 1727, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/14; Timothy Tyrell to Lady Frances Stapleton, Nevis, 23 March 1722/23, Ryl. Stapleton MS 7/1.

³¹ William Stapleton to his attornies, 10 July 1722, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/1; Timothy Tyrell to William Stapleton, 1 June 1722, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/11; James Symonds to William Stapleton, Nevis, 23 June 1722, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/14; 'Inventory of Sir William Stapleton's estate in Nevis, 1723', Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/14.

trouble to put it in order';³² in other words, sustained investment with an eye to the long-term, which Stapleton was to prove unable to provide. Even as late as May 1723, when Herbert assumed his post as manager, the estate still had a neglected air. It was, he reported, 'over-run with grass, and the whole destitute of any kinde of provision'.³³

With Herbert in place, however, Stapleton quickly took emergency measures designed to stimulate the plantation's revival. As Symonds had recommended, he sent two indentured servants from England to assist his hard-pressed manager. Fresh expenditure was sanctioned on essential foodstuffs and on livestock, including extra mules to power the sugar mills. Finally, in October 1723 Stapleton shipped almost £80 of supplies, including the urgently-needed slave clothes and some casks. For his part, Herbert set about repairing the sugar works, weeding and manuring the recently-planted canes, and buying corn and herrings for the hungry slaves to see them through the traditionally difficult summer months. By the autumn, as a result of this flurry of activity, the sugar planting cycle that inexorably governed life on a Caribbean plantation could resume.³⁴

The growing and processing of sugar cane was a problematical and sophisticated business, combining as it did agriculture and industry. Planters were at the mercy of the weather, their equipment, and their slave labour force. These considerations rendered it, as William Stapleton was soon to discover, 'the most uncertain production upon the face of the earth'.³⁵ An early warning sign came with the first full crop in 1724 which fell below expectations (See Table 1 for sugar export figures). Henceforth output fluctuated wildly almost on an annual basis. Though there was some improvement in 1725, the next two years were disastrous because of an island-wide drought and mounting slave resistance.³⁶ Nothing was exported in 1726 and only fifty-two hogsheads were shipped in 1727. Fortunately for Stapleton, a sustained recovery in the estate's

³² Timothy Tyrell to Lady Frances Stapleton, Nevis, 23 March 1722/23, Ryl. Stapleton MS 7/1.

³³ Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 12 June 1723, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5.

³⁴ Timothy Tyrell to William Stapleton, Nevis, 1 June 1723, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/11; Timothy Tyrell to William Stapleton, 2 October 1723, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/11; Timothy Tyrell to William Stapleton, 30 April 1724, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/11; Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 12 June 1723, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5; Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, 4 May 1724, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5; Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 18 July 1724, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5; Butler's invoices, sugar accounts A, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2.

³⁵ William Beckford, *A descriptive account of the island of Jamaica*, 2 vols (London, 1790), ii, 11. Quoted in Craton and Walvin, *A Jamaican plantation*, 96. Good descriptions of the sugar cultivation and processing cycle can be found in Dunn, *Sugar and slaves*, 190–201; Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery*, 107–118; Pares, *A West-India fortune*, 103–20; and Craton and Walvin, *A Jamaican plantation*, 96–124.

³⁶ Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 25 September 1725; Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 12 June 1726; Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 24 June 1726, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5.

fortunes ensued during 1728–30, when average annual production topped 100 hogsheads. But 1731 saw sugar output nosedive again as Nevis was hit by another severe drought.³⁷ A sharp upswing in 1732 and 1733 followed as exports reached their highest level during the period studied, then 1734 saw the illusion of recovery evaporate entirely as a result of the onset of the damaging aphid disease known as the ‘blast’.³⁸ The late 1730s saw no great change in this see-saw pattern. Over 100 hogsheads were shipped once again in 1735, falling to thirty in 1736. Production then began to climb, reaching ninety-one in 1737 and 110 in 1738. Given these rapid fluctuations, three-year averages convey a clearer picture of what was happening on the estate. They show annual exports commencing at a low point of fifty-nine hogsheads during 1724–26 before doubling to 108 in the period 1727–29. Average output then gradually tailed off to ninety-five hogsheads during 1730–32, ninety-three in 1733–35 and seventy-seven in the final three-year period (1736–38).

**Table 1: Sugar Exports from the Stapleton Estate, 1724–1738
(in hogsheads)**

Year	Volume
1724	76
1725	100
1726	0
1727	52
1728	143
1729	130
1730	104
1731	27
1732	153
1733	163
1734	0
1735	115
1736	30
1737	91
1738	110
Total	1294
Mean	86.27

Sources: Herbert’s accounts, 1724–33, sugar accounts E; Invoices for sugar shipped, 1730–37, sugar accounts C, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2. On average a hogshead equalled 14 cwt. or 1,568 lbs.

³⁷ Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 5 June 1731, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5.

³⁸ David Stalker to William Stapleton, Nevis, 3 September 1734, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/10.

Not surprisingly, as sugar exports oscillated so did Stapleton's gross revenue (see Table 2). The patterns did not coincide exactly, however, because crop quality and London prices also varied subtly.

Table 2: Income from the Stapleton Estate, 1724–1738

a) Sugar Returns (in £)

Year	Revenue
1724	1507
1725	1680
1726	0
1727	764
1728	2402
1729	2184
1730	1238
1731	372
1732	1821
1733	1940
1734	0
1735	1509
1736	410
1737	1577
1738	2079
Total	19483
Mean	1299

b) Average Annual Costs (in £)

Invoice (regular shipments from England)	92
Purchase of mill and slaves	40
Loss of sugar in transit	182
Freight	211
Insurance	52
Factor's commission	32
Total	609

c) Balance (in £)

Average annual returns	1299
Average annual costs	609
Average annual income	690

Sources: Sugar prices from Butler correspondence, Ryl. Stapleton MSS 4/2 and 4/3 and from Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery*, Appendix V, 496–7; for regular shipments from England, see Butler's invoices, sugar accounts A, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2; for estimates of the loss of sugar in transit (14%), freight rates (3s. 6d. per cwt), insurance (4%), and the factor's commission (2.5%), see Ward, 'Profitability of sugar planting', 199–200.

As for all staple producers, the best years for Jennings and Balls Range's owner were those in which the estate's production was higher than usual, at a time when prices were relatively good because competitors had done less well. These conditions certainly did not apply in the opening years of Stapleton's proprietorship. Taking the same periods as before, the absentee only earned average gross receipts of £1,062 from the sugar shipped during 1724–26. But the trends began to work in his favour during the late 1720s. As production increased in the years 1727–29 and sugar prices held up,³⁹ his revenue soared to £1,783 per annum. The improvement was not sustained into the early 1730s, however. With both exports and prices falling,⁴⁰ returns from the plantation slumped to £1,144 during 1730–32 and only grew modestly to £1,150 in the ensuing three years. The final period (1736–38) saw some improvement. Stapleton's average gross receipts climbed to £1,355 despite a decline in average production. This was the combined result of rising London prices, the quality of the crop, and the plantation's improved performance relative to that of its neighbours. The estate accounted for 0.49 per cent of Nevis's sugar exports in the final three-year period compared with 0.15 per cent in 1724–26, 0.30 per cent during 1727–29, 0.26 per cent in 1730–32 and 0.24 per cent during 1733–35.⁴¹

Lacking first-hand experience of Caribbean conditions, Stapleton never adjusted to the rollercoaster life of a long-distance proprietor. Despite his family's long and close links with the island, he appeared uncertain about what to expect from his Nevis investment and seemed genuinely shocked by the rapid fluctuations in the sugar trade. Anticipating quick and easy returns from his outlays, the absentee usually found his hopes dashed. His disappointment persisted until his death in January 1740. In a final letter to his attornies written from Cheltenham the previous summer, Stapleton highlighted the frustrations his West Indian venture had brought him. '[M]y affairs abroad have met with very unfortunate accidents for many years past,' he lamented, 'insomuch that I have had very little returns from them . . .'⁴²

³⁹ See correspondence between the Butlers and Stapleton for conditions on the London sugar market, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/2 and 4/3.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ See Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery*, Appendix 2 for Nevis sugar exports.

⁴² William Stapleton to his attornies, Cheltenham, 22 August 1739, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/1.

This was not true. In fact, as will be seen later, Stapleton received reasonable profits from his estate. But the uncertainty that instability engendered together with his conviction that the rate of return should have been higher induced a damaging paralysis. Like many absentees, Stapleton proved either unable or reluctant to plan for the long-term welfare of his plantation. Most strikingly, he failed to build upon the initial emergency expenditures of 1723 and did not follow up on his early bold promise 'to make what improvements are necessary upon my estate'.⁴³ Instead, Stapleton refused to make the essential investment in capital and labour needed to revive and develop the plantation. Despite constant pleas during the 1720s from his manager and attornies, the estate's underlying problems went unaddressed.⁴⁴ Sugar mills were not replaced, the well was not repaired, other essential construction work was deferred, and the labour force was not replenished. Only after the series of good harvests in the final years of the decade did Stapleton finally consent to major expenditure, probably amounting to about £600 in all, on new equipment for the mill and well, a cart for dunging and transportation, and some imported African slaves.⁴⁵ His agents greeted their arrival with relief. But any hopes they entertained that this might represent a significant and permanent shift in policy were soon dashed. Once returns began to decline, these outlays stopped abruptly. As a result, the capital stock continued to deteriorate. Moreover, despite his manager's advice, his parsimony extended to minor yet essential day-to-day expenses, most notably on slave provisions and clothing.⁴⁶ Despite initial expectations, the predominant image remains that of a stagnant, even somewhat neglected estate.

Moreover, the absentee's unrealistic expectations and consequent refusal to invest in his plantation on a long-term basis poisoned his relations with his employees. Unable to oversee his client directly, Stapleton soon came to distrust Joseph Herbert (the new manager appointed in 1723) and his motives for pleading for fresh cash injections. After only a year he was questioning the expenses incurred in the estate's initial refurbishment and was complaining about Herbert's stewardship. Herbert responded by highlighting the cost of repairing basic equipment and buying

⁴³ William Stapleton to his attornies, 10 July 1722, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/1.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 25 May 1728, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5; and David Stalker to William Stapleton, Nevis, 29 June 1729, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/10.

⁴⁵ Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 2 April 1730, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5; Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 28 April 1730, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5; Herbert's accounts, 1724-33, sugar accounts E, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2; David Stalker to William Stapleton, Nevis, 5 June 1730, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/10. On the construction of the mill, also see Gay (ed.), 'Letters from a sugar plantation', 152.

⁴⁶ Herbert and Stalker made repeated requests for provisions and clothing during the 1720s and 1730s. See their correspondence in Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5 and 4/10.

provisions.⁴⁷ The manager's original champion, Timothy Tyrell, also came to his client's defence, stressing that he had got the plantation 'in better order than I have known it for some time past'.⁴⁸ Despite these pleas, Stapleton never regained confidence in Herbert. Adopting the conventional absentee view that 'greater extortioners are hardly to be met with than West Indian agents, attornies and overseers', he came to believe that the manager was cheating him by siphoning off rum production, provisions and receipts.⁴⁹ His doubts about his subordinate's honesty certainly helps explain his reluctance to sanction extra expenditure on the plantation during the mid-1720s. Clearly the network of informal kin and patronage ties that Stapleton – like other early eighteenth-century absentees – put his faith in, lost efficacy as a management technique with distance, resulting in a deep-seated suspicion that adversely affected the running of his estate.

In 1727 Stapleton even sent a trusted indentured servant to the Caribbean to monitor Herbert's performance.⁵⁰ Employed as overseer, David Stalker sent back regular reports on the estate's condition and the activities of his immediate superior. His assessment of Herbert's character was generally positive. He concluded that, although Stapleton might find a less expensive manager, he would be hard pressed to get anybody as diligent.⁵¹ Yet, as a memorandum of July 1731 indicates, the absentee continued to harbour grave doubts. In a long list of queries, he reminded himself to 'write to Davy [Stalker] to know how many house negroes Herbert employees', 'compare Davy's acct. of molasses . . . for the year 1730 with Herberts acct. of Rum', and 'write Mr. Herbert word that he has not mention'd the price that suggars bore att the time he charges me 10330 of sugar for his salary end: May 1731 . . .'.⁵²

Sick of his employer's incessant nagging, Herbert finally decided to resign in 1733. Explaining the step in a revealing letter, he explored the underlying sources of tension between himself and the ever-suspicious absentee. Herbert disliked Stapleton's constant carping about the level of expenses, even though weather conditions and other factors put this largely out of his control. He also resented the absentee's insinuation that he was spending too much on provisions, pointing out that he had to provide for his family, Stalker, hired workmen and sick slaves. Thirdly, Herbert emphasized that he had

⁴⁷ Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 18 July 1724; Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 30 July 1724, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5.

⁴⁸ Timothy Tyrell to William Stapleton, 30 April 1724, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/11.

⁴⁹ Quotation from Goveia, *Slave society*, 110. Rum and molasses were often used to pay island expenses, see Pares, *A West-India fortune*, 139; and Walter Nisbet to Catherine Stapleton, September [n.d.], 1783, Stapleton-Cotton MS 17/1.

⁵⁰ David Stalker to William Stapleton, Nevis, 17 January 1728, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/10.

⁵¹ David Stalker to William Stapleton, Nevis, 13 April 1732, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/10.

⁵² Gay (ed.), 'Letters from a sugar plantation', 168–9.

not abused his position. He had not ‘been selfish, but have made a moderate use of my privileges, recd my just Salary and NO MORE’. Fourthly, Herbert highlighted Stapleton’s inability to grasp the realities of Caribbean sugar cultivation, expressing disappointment that the attornies – men to whom he presumably thought the absentee would pay attention – ‘have not more frequently acquainted you with the affairs of your plantation, with regards to its wants, the weather, or my Management of it’. Finally, he bitterly resented not making more money from the job. ‘[F]or seeing managements so much Sollicited for, and Many Managers grow so Suddenly rich,’ Herbert wrote, ‘I really thought there may be means of improving a Slendr fortune with honesty’. Though he had received his ‘due’, any grander ambitions remained unfulfilled. Given the self-serving, disingenuous character of such correspondence between absentees and subordinates, it is almost impossible to gauge whether, as Herbert put it, Stapleton’s problems were ‘more your misfortune than my fault’.⁵³ What is clear, however, is that the level of mistrust so evident in their letters must have had a corrosive effect on plantation management.

Stapleton’s misfortune did not end with Herbert’s departure. His successor was the ex-servant, David Stalker. Given their personal tie, the absentee presumably believed that Stalker would prove a more deferential and reliable client than his resident-planter predecessor. This may have been true. But what followed in the mid-1730s was a chronicle of almost unmitigated disaster – a textbook lesson in the difficulties that could befall West Indian planters. The estate was ravaged by the blast; the island was hit by another famine; and both slave mortality and resistance increased.⁵⁴ Faced with problems that his Caribbean apprenticeship had not really prepared him for, Stalker fell apart. Describing himself as ‘the Greatest Slave in the plantation’ and as looking like a ghost, he took to drink and evidently started to abuse the labourers in his charge.⁵⁵ Everybody must have been relieved when Stalker died after a long bout of the ‘black jaundice’, probably induced by his excessive alcohol consumption, in early May 1738.⁵⁶ Naturally, given the experience of the previous few years, his supporters emphasized the sobriety, industriousness, and honesty of his successor. However, the manner of James Parris’s appointment marked no sharp break with the past. Patronage once again played a critical role: Parris received powerful

⁵³ Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 28 September 1733; Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 1 February 1726–7, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4.5.

⁵⁴ See Stalker correspondence, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4.10.

⁵⁵ David Stalker to William Stapleton, Nevis, 15 December 1736; David Stalker to William Stapleton, Nevis, February [n.d.], 1736/7, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4.10.

⁵⁶ Edward Lloyd to William Stapleton, Nevis, 20 May 1738, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/7. On the connection between jaundice and heavy drinking among West Indian planters, see Dunn, *Sugar and slaves*, 306.

backing from the attorney, James Symonds. Meanwhile, Stapleton was relieved that the new manager was a relative of his London agent, Thomas Butler Sr.⁵⁷ Clearly he had failed to learn that such personal connections did not overcome the communication problems inherent in eighteenth-century absentee ownership.

Like the Pinneys during the late eighteenth century, Stapleton became disillusioned with each of his subordinates and never found a satisfactory mode of long-distance management.⁵⁸ As late as 1739 the notion of becoming a resident planter still exercised some allure.⁵⁹ Obviously he felt that his inability to oversee his dependents directly played a central role in his perceived ill-fortune. But, even for us, it is hard to single this out as the decisive factor. The 'uneven' 1720s⁶⁰ and depressed 1730s were difficult times for all the island's sugar producers whether resident or not. Unfavourable weather conditions, famine, the onset of the 'blast' and slave unrest combined to restrict production and undermined the regularity that John Pinney, for instance, regarded as essential in planting.⁶¹ Meanwhile, growing competition from the French squeezed profit margins by depressing sugar prices and increasing the cost of essential provisions such as foodstuffs and lumber products.⁶² These global factors seemingly transcended issues of estate management and posed risks to the entire industry across the British Caribbean. Certainly Herbert continually stressed that Stapleton was faring better than many resident planters, including himself. By the autumn of 1732, speaking on behalf of Nevis inhabitants, the manager joined the clamour for Parliamentary legislation to promote the 'Relief, Improvement, and Safety' of the West Indies. Herbert urged Stapleton, as a member of 'that noble and august assembly', to take action.⁶³ And by April 1733 he was stressing that the situation in the Leewards had reached crisis point: '[W]ithout some healing remedy,

⁵⁷ Thomas Butler Sr to William Stapleton, London, 13 July 1738, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/2; Charles Pym to William Stapleton, St Kitts, 17 May 1738, Ryl. Stapleton 4/9. Butler, a prominent London merchant and West Indian plantation owner himself, was colonial agent for Nevis from 1726 to 1744. See Lillian Penson, *The colonial agents of the British West Indies: a study of colonial administration mainly in the eighteenth century* (London: London U.P., 1924), Appendix 2, 252.

⁵⁸ Pares, *A West-India fortune*, ch. 7.

⁵⁹ William Stapleton to his attornies, Cheltenham, 22 August 1739, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/1.

⁶⁰ The phrase comes from Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery*, 422.

⁶¹ For Pinney's view, see Pares, *A West-India fortune*, 105–7. Perhaps this is what Stapleton was working towards in 1739 when he asked that his manager send an annual account of 'what pieces the plants for ye next year . . .' William Stapleton to his attornies, Cheltenham, 22 August 1739, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/1.

⁶² For a summary of planter complaints, see Robertson, *A supplement*, 2. Pitman, *Development of the British West Indies*, 242–70 and Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery*, 54–68 provide sound accounts of the background to the Molasses Act of 1733.

⁶³ Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 28 September 1733; Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 1 September 1732, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5; Robert Robertson, *A detection of the state and situation of the present sugar planters, of Barbados and the Leeward Islands* (London: J. Wilford, 1732), iii.

and timely apply'd too', the anxious manager wrote, 'I see the entire ruin of their inhabitants'.⁶⁴ A 'healing remedy', partly drafted by Stapleton, was duly introduced the following month in the form of the Molasses Act. But the measure did not bring immediate relief and the economy remained in a fragile state into the mid-1730s.⁶⁵ Arguably then, Stapleton was merely sharing in the misfortunes of his less renowned neighbours. The only difference lay in his perception that his estate was singularly stricken.

If we return to the issue of estate management techniques, however, the history of Jennings and Balls Range appears to confirm that absentee management was wasteful and inefficient. Certainly Stapleton's chronic mistrust of his employees meant that his pattern of supervision can be characterized as too little, too late, and that begrudgingly. But, despite all the difficulties, Jennings and Balls Range remained fairly productive. The average sugar output per slave over the period studied was 9.4 cwt, compared with 10.9 for the Leewards as a whole during the early eighteenth century: in some years it reached the very respectable level of over a hogshead per slave.⁶⁶ And evidence from the admittedly incomplete accounts reveals that, even using the most conservative estimates of sugar prices, Stapleton's estate still provided him with reasonable average gross annual receipts of just under £1,300 during the fifteen years, 1724–38. When additional cash outlays and the cost of shipping, losses in transit, storage, and insurance were deducted, he was left with an average annual net income of £690 (See Table 2).⁶⁷ This represented a rate of return of approximately 12 per cent. Though this did not match the exceptional 16 per cent achieved on the Parham estate in Antigua during the same period, it was creditable.⁶⁸ Despite Stapleton's constant carping, absenteeism, even on a marginal island in a treacherous period, remained profitable. Certainly, estimates compiled by Robert Robertson confirm that he fared at least as well as his resident neighbours.⁶⁹ Despite hard times

⁶⁴ Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 13 April 1733, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5.

⁶⁵ For details of the Molasses Act, see Pitman, *Development of the British West Indies*, 250–66; and, Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery*, 67–8. Robertson comments critically on early drafts in *An enquiry into the methods propos'd to retrieve the sugar trade* (London: J. Wilford, 1733), 8–10.

⁶⁶ For the Leewards' average, see Ward, 'Profitability of sugar planting', 206.

⁶⁷ See Table 2 for the assumptions made in calculating these figures. Gay estimated Stapleton's average annual gross receipts for the years 1725–31 at £1,250, 'Letters from a Sugar Plantation', 151. For comparisons with other British West Indian estates, see Dunn, *Sugar and slaves*, 190; Pares, *A West-India fortune*, 87–92; Ward, *British West Indian slavery*, 45–54; Craton and Walvin, *A Jamaican plantation*, 88–9, 117–18; and especially Ward, 'Profitability of sugar planting', 210–13.

⁶⁸ For the rate of return, see Ward, 'Profitability of sugar planting' The figure for the Parham plantation appears on p. 204.

⁶⁹ Robertson estimates average net receipts of £867 for a hypothetical plantation of 200 acres, but adds that during hard times like the 1720s and 1730s profits could fall to one-half or even one-quarter of that amount. See *Detection of the state and situation of the present sugar planters*, 48–9.

and numerous obstacles a West Indian sugar plantation like Jennings and Balls Range – though no ‘Golden Mine’⁷⁰ – remained one of the more lucrative enterprises in British North America and a potential source of wealth, if not great riches. Perhaps here, as with his view of the degree of supervision he should be able to exercise *in absentia*, Stapleton’s jaundiced view of his plantation experience derived largely from misguided expectations about the realities of early eighteenth-century Caribbean sugar production.

Stapleton’s respectable profits were exacted at a high price. Predictably, his slaves were the most spectacular victims of the absentee’s status as an ‘aristocratic capitalist’. Divorced by race and standing from the network of clientage and dependency within which Stapleton operated, they were equally trapped in the web of mistrust, accusation and counter-charge that defined the proprietor’s relations with his managers. Even worse, virtually every labourer on Jennings and Balls Range was subject to the brutal, unremitting sugar crop regime. Unlike on other Caribbean plantations, Stapleton’s slaves were not divided into working groups according to age and strength.⁷¹ Whilst young children may have been employed separately in weeding and hoeing, the inventories only explicitly mention the common gang. This included all those available of working age except three stockkeepers, two watchmen, two female domestics and the manager’s personal ‘waiting boy’. Others undoubtedly had specialized skills. A favoured slave, Frank, served as driver and rum distiller until he ran away in 1729. Johnny Cane and Davy, described in 1733 as ‘the best slave on ye plantation’, both occupied the pivotal position of sugar boiler. Finally, three other labourers were trained as coopers and carpenters. But they were often all forced to work in the gang and many specialized tasks, especially in construction or smithing, were left to hired white artisans.⁷²

The principal reason for this striking lack of occupational differentiation was that the estate was simply ‘under Slav’d’.⁷³ Because of neglect following the French invasion, Stapleton had

⁷⁰ The phrase came from *ibid.*, 17.

⁷¹ ‘A list of negroes belonging to the estate of the honble William Stapleton Bart taken May 17, 1731’, Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3; Pares, *A West-India fortune*, ch. 6; Craton, *Searching for the invisible man*, 139–52.

⁷² ‘A list of negroes belonging to the estate of the honble William Stapleton Bart taken May 17, 1731’, Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3; Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 27 July 1725, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5; ‘A list of negroes belonging to the estate of Sir William Stapleton taken this 14th of September, 1733’, Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3; Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 13 September 1728, Ryl. Stapleton 4/5; Herbert’s accounts, 1724–33, sugar accounts E, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2; Stalker’s plantation accounts, sugar accounts D, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2.

⁷³ William Stapleton to his attornies, 10 July 1722; William Stapleton to Timothy Tyrell, 16 August 1722, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/1.

inherited a small, imbalanced labour force. Even after his mother gave four slaves as a present, the total population only stood at 138 in 1724 (See Table 3).⁷⁴ Moreover, just over half were either too young, too old or too sick to contribute fully to plantation work. This left only sixty-eight prime hands (forty-three men and twenty-five women) to undertake the arduous task of restoring the plantation's health.⁷⁵ Another inventory from 1728 that provides approximate ages reveals another dimension to the problem. Only 21 per cent of the slave population fell into the category that Caribbean planters regarded as really desirable – males in their late teens and twenties.⁷⁶ With a significant workload therefore falling on adult women of childbearing age, this did not auger well for slave fertility, infant care and the prospects for natural increase.

Table 3: The Stapleton Estate's Slave Population, 1724–1739

Year	Total
1724	138
1725	*
1726	131
1727	*
1728	126
1729	129
1730	*
1731	143
1732	142
1733	136
1734	135
1735	131
1736	132
1737	107
1738	105
1739	109
Mean	128

* Indicates no surviving inventory

Source: Plantation inventories and lists of negroes, Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3.

⁷⁴ Timothy Tyrell to William Stapleton, 2 October 1723, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5; 'A list of negroes and cattle, 1724', Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3.

⁷⁵ 'A list of negroes and cattle, 1724', Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3.

⁷⁶ 'List of negroes belonging to Sir William Stapleton's estates in Nevis, taken February 18th, 1728', Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3.

Predictably the shortcomings of the labour force became even more acute during the late 1720s. The slaves, as on other early eighteenth-century West Indian plantations such as Worthy Park in Jamaica and the Codrington estates on Barbados, were simply unable to sustain their numbers.⁷⁷ With deaths regularly outnumbering births, the black population suffered a gradual decline, broken only by a slight unsustainable increase in 1728–29. By 1729, after nineteen deaths and ten registered births, there were 129 slaves residing on the plantation.⁷⁸ Some of those who died had worked on Jennings and Balls Range for years and had been old and invalid. They were probably seen as burdens on the estate. However, others, like Mingo and Will, had been valuable labourers and represented a significant loss.⁷⁹ As a result, both the number and proportion of workers declined further, handicapping efforts to put plantation production back on a regular footing.

Stapleton responded to this frustrating situation in the same way as his contemporaries. Rather than attempting to ameliorate material conditions for his work-force in the hope of encouraging natural increase over the long term, he restocked the plantation with fresh imports from Africa when the situation became desperate. In the spring of 1730 he asked his attorneys to purchase ten to fifteen new slaves at the first available opportunity. They complied with his instructions in early 1731, acquiring seventeen in two separate lots.⁸⁰ All were of prime age – in their teens or early twenties – and were Coromantines from the Gold Coast, the slaves Nevis planters preferred because they believed that they were accustomed to ‘vast Heats’ and ‘scarcity of

⁷⁷ On slave demography in the eighteenth-century British West Indies, see Ward, *British West Indian slavery*, 29–37; Sheridan, *Doctors and slaves: a medical and demographic history of slavery in the British West Indies, 1680–1834* (Cambridge: University Press, 1985), 185–248; Craton, ‘Jamaican slave mortality: fresh light from Worthy Park, Longville, and the Tharp estates’, *Journal of Caribbean History*, 3 (1971), 1–27; and Betty Wood and T.R. Clayton, ‘Slave birth, death, and disease on Golden Grove Plantation, Jamaica, 1765–1810’, *Slavery and Abolition*, 6 (1985), 99–121. The inability of the black population to reproduce itself is also highlighted in Robertson, *A Letter*, 11. He ascribed it to polygamy among other things. For Worthy Park and the Codrington estates, see Craton, *Searching for the invisible man*; Butler, ‘Mortality and labour on the Codrington estates, Barbados’; and J. Harry Bennett, *Bondsmen and bishops: slavery and apprenticeship on the Codrington plantations of Barbados, 1710–1838* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California U.P., 1958).

⁷⁸ ‘Plantation inventories and lists of negroes’, 1724, 1726, 1728, 1729, Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3.

⁷⁹ See descriptions in ‘Plantation inventories and lists of Negroes’, 1724, 1726, Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3.

⁸⁰ David Stalker to William Stapleton, Nevis, 5 June 1730, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2. Stalker advised his master to buy young slaves between twelve and fifteen years of age, claiming: ‘They are fully seasoned by 18 and is fully as hardy as them that is born in the Country . . .’ On the purchases, see Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 31 January 1730/31, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5; Charles Pym to William Stapleton, St Kitts, February 28, 1730/31, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/9; Charles Pym account, 1730, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/9.

Provisions'.⁸¹ Moreover, the cohort's sex ratio of approximately two to one was regarded as ideal. Described by Stalker as 'Some of the finest tha[t] ever I Seen', the newly-imported slaves were purchased at the right time for seasoning and were soon put to work.⁸²

Despite these favourable omens, the experiment was not a success. Predictably the customary three-year seasoning process took its toll. By 1734 five of the Africans had died, probably as a result of amoebic dysentery or pneumonia.⁸³ In addition, another two – Will and Daniel – committed suicide only a few months after their arrival. According to Herbert, they 'went into the woods on a sunday and hang'd themselves'.⁸⁴ Possibly they were responding to the traditional onset of hard times following the completion of the harvest in June.⁸⁵ More likely, Will and Daniel shared the belief common among new arrivals that, through death, they could accomplish a return to their homelands. Other newcomers sought release via the less self-destructive method of running away. Three of the Africans escaped and were recaptured during their first three years on Jennings and Balls Range and one – Bray – earned a reputation as a 'very bad slave . . . a run away'.⁸⁶ The survivors' ordeal did not end with their successful passage through the seasoning period either. They remained acutely vulnerable to malnutrition, disease and David Stalker's ill-treatment during the mid to late 1730s. Another six died then, including Priam and Violet of the 'flux' and Bawdoo of the 'black scurvy'. Only four of the original seventeen remained alive by 1739.⁸⁷

The introduction of these new labourers possibly had the further effect of spreading latent infections among the overworked and underfed seasoned workers. Duplicating the pattern identified by Mary Butler on the Codrington estates in Barbados, morbidity was high on Jennings and Balls Range in 1732 and 1733 after the arrival of the 'salt-water' slaves.⁸⁸ But worse was to follow. As a result of famine and poor treatment under Stalker's management,

⁸¹ On Nevis planters' preference for Gold Coast slaves, see Charles Pym to William Stapleton, St Kitts, 28 February 1730/31, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/9. The quotation comes from Reverend William Smith, *A natural history of Nevis, and the rest of the English Leeward Charibee islands in America* (Cambridge, 1745), 225.

⁸² David Stalker to William Stapleton, Nevis, 6 June 1731, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/10.

⁸³ 'Plantation inventories and lists of negroes', 1731, 1732, 1733, 1734, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5. For the illnesses afflicting newly-arrived slaves, see Kenneth F. Kiple, *The Caribbean slave: a biological history* (Cambridge: University Press, 1984), 65–6.

⁸⁴ Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 21 July 1731, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5.

⁸⁵ Kiple, *The Caribbean slave*, 92.

⁸⁶ Smith, *A natural history of Nevis*, 228; Herbert's accounts, 1724–33, sugar accounts E. Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2; 'A list of negroes belonging to the estate of Sir William Stapleton taken this 14th of September 1733', Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3.

⁸⁷ 'Plantation inventories and lists of negroes', 1734, 1735, 1736, 1737, 1738, 1739, Ryl. Stapleton 6/3.

⁸⁸ See Butler, 'Mortality and labour', 48–67.

the plantation suffered from an increased mortality rate that peaked in 1736 when twenty-seven slaves died of the 'dropsy', the 'flux', and the 'evil'.⁸⁹ Stapleton's attempt to augment the labour force by importation therefore had decidedly mixed results. The slave population actually declined during the 1730s from a high point of 143 in 1731 to 105 by 1738 (See Table 3). But the proportion of prime hands in the latter year was higher than when he took over the plantation. Sixty-one (thirty-three men and twenty-eight women) or 58 per cent of the slaves fell into this category in 1738 compared with 49 per cent in 1724.⁹⁰ This slight improvement in the black population's balance had been achieved at a considerable cost, however, and the increased proportion of adult women engaged in field work indicated that further problems lay ahead.

Given the abusive treatment meted out to them, the slaves' failure to thrive was hardly surprising. Stapleton displayed few patriarchal sentiments towards them. Instead, the absentee's directives ensured that they were underfed, poorly clothed and housed, and received only rudimentary medical care. Most importantly, considering the heavy labour expected of them, their diet was poor. Stapleton's slaves, like their counterparts elsewhere on Nevis, were largely dependent on sweet potatoes and yams grown on the estate itself: according to a plantation plan drawn up in 1736, thirty-one acres were given over to these crops.⁹¹ To supplement this monotonous fare, North American corn, salted herrings and beef were provided.⁹² And, in times of severe difficulty, horsebeans and 'bisket bread' were occasionally sent directly from England.⁹³ Finally, Stapleton's work-force had access to a small five-acre provision ground, probably located in the plantation's rugged upper reaches. This not only provided them with additional foodstuffs such as vegetables and poultry, but with commodities that could be traded at the Sunday morning market in nearby Charlestown.⁹⁴ Under the most favourable conditions, however, these sources provided barely enough food to meet the slaves' minimum needs. In addition, the chronic shortage of fat in their diet meant that they never received full benefit from the vitamins they were ingesting. This left them

⁸⁹ 'A list of all the negroes etc. now being on Sir William Stapleton – his plantation in the island of Nevis, taken by David Stalker, June 20 1737', Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3.

⁹⁰ 'A list of negroes belonging to the estate of the honble William Stapleton Bart taken May 17, 1731'; 'A list of all the negroes etc. belonging to Sr. William Stapleton Barronett on his plantation in Nevis. Dated 8th October 1738', Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3.

⁹¹ On the Nevis slave diet, see Barry Higman, *Slave populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1984), 208; 'The letters of the plan, 1736', Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3.

⁹² For the purchase of foodstuffs, see Herbert's accounts, 1724–33, sugar accounts E: Stalker's plantation accounts, sugar accounts D, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2.

⁹³ Butler's invoices, sugar accounts A, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2.

⁹⁴ 'The letters of the plan, 1736', Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3; for a description of the Charlestown market, see Smith, *A natural history of Nevis*, 232.

prone to the full range of deficiency diseases – beriberi, pellagra, scurvy, night blindness – that plagued eighteenth-century Caribbean slave populations.⁹⁵

But the 1720s and 1730s were not, of course, the best of times for Nevis labourers. Extreme weather ranging the gamut from hurricanes to drought destroyed food crops and generated famine conditions. At points the slaves were starving. Yet Stapleton's response can only be described as short-sighted, even hardhearted. Was this another consequence of the absentee's inability to exercise direct supervision? Presumably he saw as an opportunity for graft and self-aggrandizement on his managers' part what they regarded as the minimum investment necessary to sustain the labour force's vitality; significantly this recognition was shared by both Herbert, a planter himself, and his ill-fated successor, Stalker, whose regime was marked by personal violence towards the slaves. When they strayed from the proprietor's directions both men were reprimanded. In one memorandum, for example, Stapleton stressed that 'the beef charg'd for the plantation is excessive as well as flower and Herrings in the Acct. 1729'.⁹⁶ His employees usually responded by pointing out that if they had not made essential purchases 'your loss in negroes must have been much more considerable than the charge (great as it is) you have been at'.⁹⁷ But this argument seemingly cut no ice with the absentee owner.

His approach towards clothing expenses was equally callous. Whereas on late eighteenth-century Leeward Island estates slaves usually received a minimal customary allowance,⁹⁸ there is no evidence that Stapleton adopted this practice during the 1720s and 1730s. He did not even countenance an annual shipment of cloth from England as John Pinney did in the 1760s.⁹⁹ Instead, lengths of brown osnaburgh and occasionally red cotton caps were intermittently sent to the Caribbean when need dictated.¹⁰⁰ These were normally insufficient, of poor quality and usually rotted well before the next shipment arrived. Both Herbert and Stalker complained continually about the bondsmens' nakedness and its impact on both their morale and health. Even Stalker, a severe taskmaster, recognized on strictly pragmatic grounds that skimping on clothing constituted a false economy. Asking once again for a shipment of osnaburgh before the onset of winter, he wrote to Stapleton in May 1732: 'I assure you Sr that they suffred very much without them, and the Work that they loose, by Sickness Occasioned from Severe Colds

⁹⁵ Kiple, *The Caribbean slave*, 53–155.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery*, 166.

⁹⁷ Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 1 February 1726/27, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5.

⁹⁸ Goveia, *Slave society*, 138.

⁹⁹ Pares, *A West-India fortune*, 131.

¹⁰⁰ For clothing shipments to the Stapleton plantation, see Butler's invoices, sugar accounts A, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2.

for want of Cloaths amounts to a greater loss than the price of the Cloaths.'¹⁰¹ As with provisions, however, this was a line of reasoning that Stapleton apparently found unpersuasive. The pleading and delays persisted down to the owner's death. 'Too little too late' applied here as well, and his slaves usually had little to protect them from the Caribbean environment and its diseases.

Housing conditions on Stapleton's plantation were also rudimentary. Within a seven-acre tract the slaves were permitted to locate and construct houses as they wished. They conventionally built wattle-and-daub huts thatched with cane or grass. Three to six slaves occupied each house with most labourers sleeping in hammocks or on the earth floor.¹⁰² These communities were described by one Nevis resident, Reverend William Smith, who lived close to Jennings and Balls Range and may have had Stapleton's estate in mind: 'They live in Huts, on the Western Side of our Dwelling-houses,' he stated, 'so that every Plantation resembles a small Town.' The slave quarters were sited there, Smith revealed, because 'we breath the pure Eastern Air, without being offended with the least nauseous smell: Our Kitchens and Boyling-houses are on the same side, and for the same reason.'¹⁰³ The slaves meanwhile lived in cramped, unhygienic conditions permeated with the stench of sugar processing.

Poor working conditions, diet, clothing and housing contributed to the high morbidity rate characteristic of Stapleton's plantation during the 1720s and 1730s. As Herbert and Stalker reported, the slaves were frequently sickly. 1724, 1726, 1728, 1729, 1732, 1733, 1736 and 1737 were particularly bad years, with morbidity normally peaking in mid-winter (November and December).¹⁰⁴ In addition, workers fell victim to industrial accidents. Mimba, a female slave in her late thirties or forties, had her hands 'ground off' presumably whilst feeding canes through the mill.¹⁰⁵ Under these circumstances the quality of medical care was crucial. Unfortunately, the correspondence and accounts provide little information on this subject. It is even unclear whether there was a hospital or 'hothouse' on the estate. Stapleton's managers did call on white doctors to administer to the slave population in emergencies. But they were employed on a fee or piece-work basis, not on an annual contract as on some other larger plantations. The 1725 account, for example, shows a payment of 14s. to a physician 'for cureing a negro of a foul disease'. A midwife, Anne Springett, also lent her services by

¹⁰¹ David Stalker to William Stapleton, Nevis, 15 May, 1732, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/10.

¹⁰² 'The letters of the plan, 1736', Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3; for a description of slave housing conditions, see Higman, *Slave populations*, 222.

¹⁰³ Smith, *A natural history of Nevis*, 225-6.

¹⁰⁴ See the Herbert and Stalker correspondence for information on morbidity.

¹⁰⁵ 'A list of all the negroes etc. belonging to the plantation of Sr. William Stapleton Barronet taken this 30th day September 1735 by David Stalker', Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3.

attending slave women in childbirth.¹⁰⁶ Fortunately the slaves were not solely dependent on white medical practitioners. They regularly administered to each other and, in one unusual instance, a bondsman actually received payment for the treatment delivered. In 1725 Herbert records the sum of 7*s.* given 'to one of yor Negroes for cureing another of a foul distemper'.¹⁰⁷ The obeah's success was not surprising. As Richard Sheridan points out, it is likely that Afro-Caribbean herbal remedies were at least as effective as European medicines in treating slave ailments.¹⁰⁸

Like their fellows elsewhere in the Caribbean, Stapleton's labourers reacted against their harsh treatment and poor material conditions. The absentee, therefore, was not the only figure attempting to shape the plantation world of Jennings and Balls Range. Drawing on the collective culture fostered in both field and quarter, the slaves resisted white authority in a variety of familiar ways.¹⁰⁹ Theft was particularly endemic. In May 1724 Herbert reported that the slaves had stolen some molasses and sold clothes from the store.¹¹⁰ As the annual cycle of deprivation peaked in the July–November wet season, sheer necessity led to an increase in this form of indiscipline. Nor did Stapleton's slaves confine their attention to Jennings and Balls Range. Instead, some roamed freely, stealing food from other plantations. In 1735, for example, Marcellus seized a quarter of pork from a neighbour's slave.¹¹¹ Given the severity of estate watchmen they were taking a considerable risk and occasionally paid with their lives. In 1727 Pompey was 'cut to pieces' whilst stealing corn from a nearby plantation. A similar fate befell Tim who was caught in William Clark's cassava ground during 1737.¹¹² Another form of slave resistance, sabotage and the maiming of animals, also took place on Jennings and Balls Range. During the 1724 incident that caught Herbert's attention, the labourers had ridden the plantation mules at night.¹¹³ This might readily be

¹⁰⁶ Information on payments to doctors and midwives appear in Herbert's accounts, 1724–33, sugar accounts E and Stalker's plantation accounts, sugar accounts D, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2; Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 21 September, 1733, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5.

¹⁰⁷ Herbert's accounts, 1724–33, sugar accounts E, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2.

¹⁰⁸ Sheridan, *Doctors and slaves*.

¹⁰⁹ The literature on slave resistance in the British Caribbean is extensive, but see particularly Michael Craton, *Testing the chains: resistance to slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1982); David B. Gaspar, *Bondsmen and rebels: a study of master-slave relations in Antigua, with implications for colonial British America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1985); and Gad Heuman (ed.), *Out of the house of bondage: runaways, resistance, and maroonage in Africa and the New World* (London: Frank Cass, 1986).

¹¹⁰ Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 4 May 1724, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5.

¹¹¹ Stalker's plantation accounts, sugar accounts D, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2.

¹¹² Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 25 August 1727, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5; 'A list of all the negroes etc. now being on Sir William Stapleton – his plantation in the island of Nevis, taken by David Stalker, June 20, 1737', Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3.

¹¹³ Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 4 May 1724, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5.

dismissed as an example of overexuberance and high jinks. Mules, however, performed many vital functions on a sugar estate and one could interpret the bondsmens' action as an assertion of their superiority over the animals that had powered the mill and thereby set the pace of work in the factory during the recently-completed harvest.

The most common mode of overt resistance on Stapleton's estate, however, was running away. Although they were slightly overrepresented, this activity was not confined to the ranks of the African slaves imported in 1731. The plantation's longer-term residents also seized every opportunity to escape and constituted the vast majority (88.5 per cent) of runaways. Moreover, perhaps reflecting their harsh treatment, female slaves composed an unusually high proportion of the escapees at approximately one-third.¹¹⁴ The result was that the plantation was rarely at full strength, generating further problems for an already-harassed management. The inventory of 1731, which provides useful information on the occupational structure of the work-force, revealed that four slaves – Dorinda, Congo Sarah, Congo Phillis and Cato – were absent.¹¹⁵ This was not atypical during the 1720s and 1730s. The plantation accounts show that one slave ran away and was recaptured in 1724, two in 1725, three in 1726, five in 1727, two in 1729, three – Stapleton, Quaw and Primis (on three separate occasions) – in 1730, three – Bray, Jacob and Hannah – in 1734, one in 1735 and two – Denbow and Hannah (twice) – in 1736.¹¹⁶ With twenty-six slaves escaping in all during the years for which information is available, this meant an average of two or three runaways per annum. The escapees therefore constituted 2 per cent of the total black population – double the proportion on Worthy Park during the late 1780s and early 1790s when there was a large influx of African slaves there. Put differently, approximately one in eight of the labourers on Jennings and Balls Range chose to flee compared with one in eleven on the Jamaican estate.¹¹⁷ Hence, the proportion of Stapleton's work-force that ran away does appear to have been quite high for a Caribbean sugar estate.

Moreover, these statistics underestimate the scale of the problem as a few fortunate slaves managed to escape the system entirely. After the indiscipline of May 1724, for instance, one incarcerated bondsman later fled from Nevis in a stolen boat accompanied by a

¹¹⁴ On female runaways, see Philip D. Morgan, 'British encounters with Africans and African-Americans, circa 1600–1780' in Bailyn and Morgan (eds.), *Strangers within the realm*, 202.

¹¹⁵ 'A list of negroes belonging to the estate of the honble William Stapleton Bart taken May 17, 1731', Ryl. Stapleton MS 6/3.

¹¹⁶ Herbert's accounts, 1724–33, sugar accounts E; Stalker's plantation accounts, sugar accounts D, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2.

¹¹⁷ Craton, *Searching for the invisible man*, 174–5, 186.

white sailor.¹¹⁸ Frank, the plantation's driver and distiller, ran away to neighbouring St Kitts in 1729. Never recaptured, he was later seen in Jamaica and it was rumoured that his ultimate objective was to sail for England and gain his freedom.¹¹⁹ Slaves like these were rare, however. Fleeing the plantation, and especially the island, required a great deal of courage, initiative and planning. Also, it meant permanently cutting oneself off from family, kin and friends. Frank, for example, left a wife and possibly children on Jennings and Balls Range when he escaped.¹²⁰ Though some other slaves – like Congo Sarah, who was absent for eleven months during 1730–31 – managed to survive for up to a year before being recaptured, most runaways fled for shorter periods and remained close to the estate.¹²¹ Though the distinction is perhaps a fine one, this suggests that they were leaving in response to intolerable conditions on the plantation – the lack of food or the fear of punishment – rather than in an attempt to gain their freedom. In other words, their actions on these occasions were essentially reactive.

That Stapleton's labourers were also willing to take the offensive is shown by their participation in the Nevis slave conspiracy of 1725 – an event that confirmed planter concern about the ever-present danger of revolt. Hungry and suffering from malnutrition as a result of a lengthy drought, the island's slaves began to plot the downfall of the plantation regime. As on nearby Antigua eleven years later, a conspiracy was uncovered that aimed 'to cut off all the whites, and take the island for themselves'. The authorities' response was predictably swift and brutal. Two of the alleged conspirators were immediately burnt alive and ten were jailed.¹²² Among those implicated in the plot and imprisoned was Frank. Skilled and privileged, he was exactly the kind of slave likely to come under suspicion from a nervous white community. '[I]n all their Plots and Conspiracies in the Sugar Colonies,' that barometer of island opinion, Robert Robertson maintained, 'the Creole-Negroes . . . and some of those from Africa that were most favour'd . . . have ever been found

¹¹⁸ Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, 4 May, 1724, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5.

¹¹⁹ Frank's checkered career can be traced in Herbert and Stalker's correspondence with Stapleton for the years 1725–30, Ryl. Stapleton MSS 4/5 and 4/10. Also see Major James Milliken to William Stapleton, St Christopher, 28 June 1726, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/8; and Timothy Tyrell to William Stapleton, 28 July 1729, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/11.

¹²⁰ Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 1 August 1729, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5.

¹²¹ Herbert's accounts, 1724–33, sugar accounts E; Stalker's plantation accounts, sugar accounts D, Ryl. Stapleton MS 5/2.

¹²² Joseph Herbert to William Stapleton, Nevis, 29 September, 1725, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/5. For further details of the 1725 Nevis conspiracy, see Thomas Butler Jr to William Stapleton, London, 21 November, 1725, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/3; Timothy Tyrell to Lady Frances Stapleton, Nevis, 25 September 1725, Ryl. Stapleton MS 7/1; and Governor Hart to the Council of Trade and Plantations, St Christophers, 6 January 1726 in C. Headlam (ed.), *Calendar of state papers: colonial series, America and West Indies, 1726–7* (London: HMSO, 1936), 1. For an interesting investigation of the 1736 Antigua conspiracy, see Gaspar, *Bondsmen and rebels*.

deepest in the Design, and the prime Directors and Actors of all the Mischief'.¹²³ Nevertheless, Herbert and others vouched for Frank's good character and, despite considerable local opposition, he was eventually released. Because several residents still held him responsible for the plot and had threatened to kill him, he was sent to England for a spell before returning to the West Indies in 1727. After receiving a formal pardon from Lord Londonderry, the Governor of the Leeward Islands, Frank, as has been pointed out, repaid his influential friends by fleeing two years later.¹²⁴ He 'never was Satisfied,' according to David Stalker, 'he did no Manner of Work but Pretended that he was Afrid of his life'.¹²⁵ Frank's story clearly exposes the mutual mistrust that lay at the heart of the slave regime and the basic incompatibility between the expectations of absentee masters, their white management and even the most favoured of bondsmen, let alone the common run of slaves. By undermining the plantation's operation still further, this tension added to Stapleton's problems during the 1720s and 1730s whilst condemning blacks to a miserable existence.

Despite the difficulties he faced and his constant grumbling, William Stapleton received a respectable income from his Nevis plantation. This was not altogether surprising for sugar remained a sufficiently lucrative crop in the early eighteenth century to overcome most material defects and managerial debilities. But, as several scholars have pointed out, the costs of long-distance proprietorship were high. For one thing, the physical fabric of Jennings and Balls Range deteriorated during Stapleton's stewardship as a result of his short-termism, reluctance to invest in plant and labour, and fraught relations with his subordinates. The plantation's decline seems only to have accelerated after his death. As early as 1750 when the estate was valued at only £7,020 currency, Sir William's son, Thomas, was forced to resort to the desperate expedient of leasing it to tenants – a certain indicator of a decayed, worn-out holding.¹²⁶ And there is evidence that this practice continued down to the end of the slavery era. Although the estate does not appear to have been sold outright, Sir Thomas's heirs did not feature among the list of slave owners to whom compensation was paid under the Emancipation Act of 1833.¹²⁷ Rather than striving to create a plantocratic society along the lines of Jamaica or Barbados, the Stapletons distanced themselves still further from the Caribbean following Sir William's tenure.

¹²³ Robertson, *A letter to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of London*, 94.

¹²⁴ See above n. 119.

¹²⁵ David Stalker to William Stapleton, Nevis, 1 August 1729, Ryl. Stapleton MS 4/10.

¹²⁶ James Smith to Mathew Burt, Bristol, 18 May 1767, Stapleton-Cotton MS 15/1a.

¹²⁷ Johnson, 'The Stapleton sugar plantations', 189–90.

This was not an option open to the slaves, the principal victims of staple production. The world that William Stapleton helped create for them in the British West Indies was nasty, brutish and short. A highly exploitative work regime, poor treatment, harsh punishment and disease ensured that they were unable to maintain their numbers. The losses sustained in the 1730s when the black population fell by almost 25 per cent were particularly acute. But, despite these adverse conditions, Stapleton's slaves displayed remarkable resilience. Not only did they generate reasonable profits for their owner even whilst their numbers were declining as in the late 1720s and late 1730s, they also refused to be totally subservient to his wishes. Through their resistance they played a vital role in moulding the plantation world of Jennings and Balls Range and the wider Caribbean community, perhaps paving the way for that authentic Creole society eulogized by Elsa Goveia and Edward Brathwaite – one striking feature of which was its predominantly black composition.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Goveia, *Slave society*; Brathwaite, *The development of Creole society in Jamaica*.