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‘I am so chained down by business to this spot’: Making money in Jamaica, 1756

When Gilbert Ford wrote that he was ‘so chained down by my business’, he was of course alluding to the institution of slavery by which all free Jamaicans made their money, whether explicitly or implicitly. Ford was a planter, and one of the elite, however, this paper uses a rare set of letters sent from Jamaica in autumn 1756 to focus on the non elite. It asks how did non-elite free people, both white and of colour, contribute to, and benefit from, the local, regional and Atlantic economy of Jamaica?

In 1756, despite the start of the Seven Years’ War, Jamaica was at the centre of Britain’s slave ‘system’ and its largest producer of sugar. The island produced huge wealth for white plantation owners at the expense of an enslaved labour force. However, there was a wide distribution in that wealth, even amongst whites. This disparity was made worse by the advent of war, with trade interrupted by the French cruising the island’s waters, rising prices, and a political dispute between the elite planters and the merchants. For example, ships’ captains such as Manus McShane had to visit various ports on the island in order to load their vessel. William Clutsam’s Bristol crew deserted him when he landed, being ‘a parcell[sic] of Drunk Fellows’. Even the slave trade was hindered, as the re-export trade to Spanish colonies such as Hispaniola was temporarily halted. Whites working on the plantations as overseers and artisans have never, quite rightly, had a great reputation, but it is clear that working conditions were not always inviting. The overseer on Dickenson’s Lacovia plantation had to sleep above the sugar curing house and wages for carpenters, tutors or tailors were never enough to attract good people. Vendue masters such as William Gear struggled to make a living; Gear had to apply to the House of Assembly for poor relief. As elsewhere, women of course were often ‘reduced to the lowest extremity’, due to *feme covert* and access to capital and credit. In the terrible disease environment of Jamaica, they were also likely to be widows, and at a young age. Many such as Ann Gallimore rented out enslaved people either in gangs or in urban areas to make a living. Others such as Elizabeth Quilliams made food for Kingston’s transient population. Ann Morley was one of very few women who were able to trade at the trans-Atlantic level.

We should not feel sorry for these people, they all gained from Jamaica’s slave economy. Even free women, as Christine Walker has recently argued, were the ‘handmaidens of Empire’. However, these stories do complicate the dominant narrative of the extremely rich plantation owner or slave merchant, and therefore help to nuance our understanding of how the economies of Britain’s Caribbean colonies worked at an important juncture in their history.