

Vincent Brown

in conversation with Edson Burton

VINCENT BROWN: So, 'Tacky's Revolt' is the name that we've given to the largest slave revolt in the eighteenth-century British Empire. It happened in Jamaica in 1760 and it was staged primarily by what were then called Coromantee people. Those were people from the Gold Coast of West Africa, roughly what's now Ghana; and Coromantee people became actually famous in the course of the late seventeenth through the first three quarters of the eighteenth century for staging revolts all across the Americas: from Suriname, all the way up to New York City.

And one of the reasons they developed this reputation is because the region of the Gold Coast during the era of the transatlantic slave trade was a particularly war-torn region. Now, this is one of the ways that the British facilitated slavery, and the Dutch and the Danish as well – by trading guns, firearms into West Africa to increase the scale and lethality of the wars there. Any time, the various polities of the Gold Coast – and there were various almost empires vying for supremacy – any time they would go to war with each other, people would be captured, enslaved, sold to the Europeans. Many of those people were soldiers or had other kinds of experiences of warfare and when they came to the Americas, sometimes they regrouped.

Former enemies, sometimes coming together because they worshipped similar gods, and spoke similar languages, and recognised similar kinds of political authority. Regrouping in the Americas and then stag[ing] revolts against plantation society, which had very knock-on reverberations around the world. So, Tacky's Revolt in 1760 becomes a way of studying that larger process of what I call 'diasporic warfare', where people are dislodged and expelled from, exiled from their homelands, but come with certain kinds of skills – and in this case, it's martial skills – which they utilise in their new environments.

EDSON BURTON: And so much I could ask you around this but, actually, let's start with: What inspired you to write this [*Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*, 2020]?

VB: One of the things, and I think where I was coming from in the United States, is that I live in the United States, which is a country that has essentially been at war all my life. I was born in 1967 at the height of the Vietnam War. That was followed by an increased build-up during the Cold War in the 1980s. We had the war over Kosovo in the 1990s, and then the terror wars from 2001 to present. When I add that up, I can't think of a five-year period when the U.S. military has not been abroad somewhere engaged in conflict with somebody. That's a half century of continuous warfare.

More specifically, the eighteenth century, which is the area of my expertise, was a century in which the British were continuously engaged in warfare with the French, but also the Spanish and the Dutch, sometimes the Danish, and others. And, so, the world of the Atlantic slave trade, that helped build up the Americas, was also a world of warfare. And so, what I wanted to do was look at slavery through the lens of that optic – warfare –

and see what I could learn about slavery and slave revolt by centring warfare.

EB: We've grown up with a kind of a visual culture around the depictions of Black resistance and so on, but could you just tell us about what you managed to tell us around the military tactics? We often don't really see the military depictions of Black resistance – if we see Black resistance at all. What does your book help to illuminate?

VB: Well, I mean, one of the things I was trying to get across is that one shouldn't just see Black resistance as 'reaction', but one should try to look for initiative among Black people. Think about their political objectives – and [that's] one of the things that warfare does, for me, that resistance doesn't do – is the idea of 'resistance' only about refusal of the authority of the planters, right? The refusal of the authority of the slaveholders?

What I wanted to see was the kind of initiatives that Black people were bringing with them to slave society... to see them, in some ways, you know, if not on an equal footing, [but] as contending militarily with British power, which they did, and occasionally quite successfully, even though not over the long term.

So, it required kind of looking deeply into African history, not assuming that the history of Black people is just the history of slavery, but also, the history of African politics, transformations in African society. Right? That people brought with them – the knowledge and this history – to the Caribbean when they became enslaved.

EB: I guess one of the issues that I come across sometimes is the idea that, in order to make a case for the injustice of slavery and its legacies, that we

kind of have to heighten the tragedy of it. So, ironically, sometimes I find that I have Black activist friends and scholars who are very keen to push the idea of the denuding of culture and also push the kind of atrocity side of the transatlantic slave trade; whereas, I'm sure your book reveals, there's so much more complexity and, fortunate or unfortunate, agency.

VB: Well, I mean... both things are true. Right? Slavery was tragic and brutal. Jamaica was one of the most unequal and brutal societies that we have known of in world history; a society in which more than ninety per cent of the population was enslaved. In which, you know, someone like Gustavus Vassa, we better know as Olaudah Equiano, had said, 'When you make people slaves, you compel them to live with you in a state of war.' And yet, it was an enormously complex society too, in which, in those extreme circumstances, people found themselves in those predicaments and still had to make political decisions; still had to form political coalitions, even among other enslaved people; still had conflicts that sometimes carried over from West Africa; sometimes were born of those extreme conditions in Jamaican slavery.

EB: How would you think *Tacky's Revolt* would support a young person who is coming to the discussion of slavery for the first time?

VB: I mean, because it is a complex subject, although I don't think the way I've written it requires a huge amount of foreknowledge of institutional slavery...

EB: Very accessible, yeah.

VB: ...but if your only assumption is that there were slaves and masters, no other categories mattered, that all Black people worked on plantations and

you didn't understand that they also worked on Royal Navy warships, there'd be a lot of new knowledge for you. The major thing that it does, though, is [it] gets us to understand the transatlantic slave trade, colonisation, and empire were processes in which Black people were caught up. And even though they were caught up in these processes – over which they had very little, or no, control – they still, as I said, had to make political decisions: very fraught life and death political decisions. In some ways, what I would encourage people to understand is that even though we are caught up in vast processes over which we have very little control, we still have to make political decisions. And we still have to take control over our little patch of history.

EB: So, Tacky's Revolt is not widely known for people outside of academia in this study, but you've also done some revisionist work on what is available in terms of the literature on it. Could you tell us a bit more about what you discovered, that I think is quite unique in my understanding of Tacky's Revolt, compared to what I picked up in other sources, including Jamaican historians like Richard Hart?

VB: I think it should be better known and one of the reasons I wrote the book is because I feel like... Look, this is the largest slave revolt in the eighteenth-century British Empire, when the British were the pre-eminent slave traders in the world and when Jamaica was their most profitable colony. The only European colony more profitable than Jamaica was the colony of Saint Domingue; French Saint Domingue, which erupted in the Haitian Revolution just three decades after Tacky's Revolt.

So, in some ways, Tacky's Revolt is the kind of prequel to the Haitian Revolution. So, I thought it should be seen as kind of on par in that understanding sequence of the development of slavery and slave revolt.

We've known it, to the degree we do, as Tacky's Revolt through the historical literature written by planters, especially the planter Edward Long, who wrote a three-volume history of Jamaica in 1774. Long was a planter who lived through Tacky's Revolt, who hated Black people, and he especially hated Africans. So, our understanding of this event is largely, you know, through one of the event's enemies, someone who wanted to play it down, wanted to write about it in certain ways... wanted to distort it for his own purposes. So, I felt that we needed an account that wasn't so beholden to Edward Long's account.

There is a movement afoot – that I support – to make Tacky a national hero in Jamaica, which I think should happen. There's an activist named Derrick 'Black X' Robinson, who has been for years and years and years walking across the island of Jamaica with a heavy, heavy chain around his neck to dramatise and promote the idea that Tacky should be a national hero, that he should be seen on par with the other Jamaican national heroes. Now, I think that's important, because I think it would recognise this event as significant to not only Jamaican national history but world history.

And yet, what I found in my research, is that Tacky wasn't the only, or even maybe the principal, leader of these events; there were others. That the revolt in the parish of St. Mary, that was led by Tacky and a couple of others that can be named, wasn't even as large as the revolt in Westmoreland Parish, that was led by someone named Opongo and someone named Simon, among the ones that can be named. And so, I try to situate Tacky in this kind of larger, what I call 'Coromantee', war of which the Saint Mary Revolt was only a part.

So, that's a kind of revision of Edward Long's version of the revolt, which named it Tacky's Revolt. In some ways, 'Tacky's Revolt' in the title can be

seen in scare quotes, because I don't think that Tacky was the only leader that should be acknowledged in the course of these events.

EB: *Tacky's Revolt...* I mean... I read it. It absolutely... I was absolutely engaged and riveted by it through the whole time.

VB: Thank you.

EB: What drew you to Jamaican history, Vincent? Is that something you'd studied a lot before?

VB: Yeah, well I like the question, partly because I'm not Jamaican. I was born in San Diego, California, and my parents are from Virginia. But I guess, one reason I could go back to, you know, is that I didn't learn much of the history of slavery, or Black history at all, in elementary schools in San Diego. I didn't learn the history of slavery, really, even in high school.

My first introduction to the history of slavery was through reggae music: artists like Bob Marley, of course, and Peter Tosh and Winston Rodney (Burning Spear), Steel Pulse, the British reggae group, that I began to learn a lot and become interested in the history of slavery. So, in some sense, it was these Jamaican artists who drew me to a larger world of Black history, of African and African American history, and the history of Atlantic slavery. And I think my focus on Jamaica, in part, just is an artefact of the fact I first just came to this interest through music.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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