

Book Review: Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War by Vincent Brown

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Vincent Brown. *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press or Harvard University Press, 2020. viii + 320 pages.

In April 1760, enslaved people in St. Mary's parish, Jamaica rose up in insurrection under the leadership of Tacky, a man from the Gold Coast captured and forced into the world of Atlantic slavery years earlier. Within weeks, Jamaica's White government suppressed the rebellion and exacted brutal punishments on its leaders. By the end of May, a rebellion began in another parish, signifying a period of prolonged insurrection that would forever change the political landscape of slavery on the island and beyond.

Vincent Brown, professor of American History and African and African American Studies and acting director of the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History at Harvard, has produced an excellent, detailed account of the events of that year in Jamaica's slave history, placing the rebellion initially known as Tacky's Revolt in its broader Atlantic world context. Brown effectively argues the revolt of 1760 was part of a much larger war that encompassed political and military conflict in western African nations, an ongoing race war between enslaved Black peoples and white slaveholders, internal divisions among the enslaved populations of the Caribbean, and imperial struggles between European nations. Placing the revolt in this trans-Atlantic setting underscores the complexities of slave revolt and emphasizes the interconnections between war, empire, and slavery. It also illuminates the political intentions and goals of those who rebelled.

At the center of Brown's narrative are several insurrection leaders identified as Coromantee, an identity formed by people who shared the common experiences of resisting enslavement on the Gold Coast, fighting in slave wars, and carrying out regimented labor. On the one hand, Jamaican slaveholders sought Coromantees because of their purported attributes of strength, endurance, intelligence, and tenacity. At the same, plantation owners feared that these

same characteristics made Coromantees formidable figures prone to rebellion. By the mid-1700s, Jamaica's enslaved population included a large percentage of Coromantees. Brown argues that understanding the Coromantee identity of many of the rebels helps us interpret the leadership of the revolt, which Brown calls the Coromantee War, as well as the political goals of the enslaved. Rebel leaders such as Tacky, Apongo (also known as Wager), and Simon all drew from their likely experiences fighting on the Gold Coast of Africa and appear to have focused on geographic targets and political goals that were informed by their experiences resisting and surviving their prior conditions while enslaved. Brown concludes that the Coromantee rebels sought to achieve lasting freedom and the creation of autonomous political entities. While White planters and officials understood localized revolts as disparate uprisings contingent upon immediate impulses and demands of the enslaved, the Coromantees saw themselves as engaged in a longer slave war that began on the Gold Coast and would continue until they had achieved their goals.

The author's detailed accounts of the revolts situated in the longer context of slavery in Jamaica reveal a complex history of shifting power and intermittent conflict. For instance, when the English gained possession of the island from Spain in the 1650s, the enslaved laborers left behind by the Spanish formed their own settlements and communities in the forested mountains inland from the coast. From their refuge, these maroon communities carved out their own areas of influence and after a period of armed resistance achieved recognition from the official English government of Jamaica. Even as these communities sometimes attracted runaways from nearby plantations, some conducted trade and other business with white plantation owners. During the Coromantee War, some maroons acted in coordination with white forces to put down the rebellion. Brown's explanation of the island's complex racial past and its dynamic political

landscape in the 1760s reveals how fragile the White population's hold on power was and supports the author's contentions about the last effects of the Coromantee War for decades to come.

While the Coromantee War, beginning with Tacky's Revolt, came to an end within a couple of years, for the next decades newly arrived enslaved peoples learned about the revolt from those who had lived through the period. From that point on, whites also recognized that the submission of their work force was never guaranteed. In the epilogue, Brown connects later events such as the Jamaican insurrection scare of 1776, the Haitian Revolution of 1792, and the effort to abolish the international slave trade to the overall context of the Atlantic slave wars that he engages throughout the book and to the Coromantee War in particular.

Brown thoroughly documents his research and methodology from start to finish. In-depth research in collections in North America and the United Kingdom undergird his narrative and shape his interpretation of the Atlantic World slave trade and the wars that both fueled the trade and relied on revenues from it. Brown also effectively uses geographic evidence to interpret the movements of the enslaved freedom fighters. Two series of detailed maps of localized rebel movements provide revealing insights into the political intentions of the rebels as they targeted valuable port facilities and perceived seats of power. When studying enslaved peoples and trying to discern the details of individual background stories, historians often face frustratingly incomplete records. In cases such as these, Brown provides plausible scenarios while acknowledging the uncertainty of each.

Tacky's Revolt makes vital points about Atlantic World slavery and the peoples who lived its viciousness every day. Understanding that slavery and war were integral to each other and conceptualizing enslavement itself as an ongoing form of war will reframe how scholars and

students think about and study the subject. It is difficult to imagine a more important contribution that a book can make to a field of history.

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