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Title:

Creole lives, British ties and the identities of white slaveholders in the British Atlantic world: A case study of Simon Taylor

Summary:

This project will consider aspects of the British diaspora, examining the ties that linked Jamaican slaveholders with Britain. It focuses on the period between the mid eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, when Jamaica was a lucrative sugar colony and when British reformers began an influential campaign against the institution of slavery. The project seeks to identify how links to the colonial metropole combined and clashed with slaveholders' local practices in the creation of cultural identities. The project will achieve this by focussing on Simon Taylor, a well-documented and politically influential sugar plantation owner and slaveholder.

Simon Taylor was part of a diasporic community of white settlers which retained extremely close links with Britain. Born in Jamaica to Scottish parents in 1740, he became a planter and amassed a huge fortune. He was prominent in local political life and was one of the most influential men on the island. He also had extremely strong personal and financial attachments to Britain. In 1813 he died in Jamaica, leaving the bulk of his wealth to his nephew, who resided in the metropole.

Through focussing principally on the attitudes revealed in Taylor's transatlantic correspondence, this project will look at how settlers sought to combine their attachment to the values of their 'home' society in Britain with their interests and concerns as slaveholders in a distant colony. The intention is to produce a journal article focussing on Taylor, thereby providing an important case study of the formation of white settler identities in the British Empire.

Research questions:

Like his contemporaries, Simon Taylor engaged in local, or creole, practices such as slaveholding and concubinage, and he fathered several illegitimate, mixed-race children. Such practices marked his difference from whites in the metropole, but men like Taylor did not wear distinctiveness easily. Jamaican whites still saw themselves as British subjects and they aspired to be recognised as such.

The main questions to be addressed by this project investigate the tensions inherent in Simon Taylor's status as a British West-Indian planter and slaveholder:

- How did men such as Taylor reflect upon their involvement in distinctively local customs and practices?

- How did they present this involvement to different audiences?
- How did Taylor and other white slaveholders negotiate being creoles and being British?
- To these colonists, what was the significance of the concept of cultural legitimacy and of fears regarding cultural or moral 'degeneracy'?

Research Context

British slaveholders are an important subject for study. Proslavery ideas influenced British discourses about racial differences, and the conservative loyalism of white settlers in the Caribbean is comparable to that displayed by colonists in other parts of the British Empire throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, although some recent scholarship has focussed on the white minority in the Caribbean, we know comparatively little about this important and influential social group. The project seeks complement this important recent scholarship as well as contributing to recent work that has traced the connections between colonial sites and the metropole.

The project will therefore be of value to those working on the history of colonisation, especially those involved in the study of the Caribbean and the Atlantic world. It builds upon my recent work on the Jamaican planter class, especially on my PhD, entitled 'Boundaries of Rule, Ties of Dependency: Jamaican Planters, Local Society and the Metropole, 1800 – 1834'. It takes this previous research forward by focusing on a particular individual and by dealing in detail with the issue of the planters' cultural identity.