CHAPTER ONE

'To plunder, to slaughter, to steal – these things they misname empire'

Tacitus, *c.* AD 98

There is not much to Port Royal these days, just a scrabble of streets, a couple of bare-shelved stores and an open sewer running down to the sea. It is certainly not royal, and – apart from the odd fishing boat pulled up on the black beach – not much of a port either. Half a dozen barefoot boys play cricket in the dirt, their wickets a plastic beer case and an up-ended table with two legs missing. There is a policeman, but nothing for him to do, for nothing much happens in Port Royal. A young man pushes a trolley through the rutted streets, a bowl of goat stew kept warm on some glowing charcoal. He has ambitions, he says: one day he plans to have his travelling restaurant mounted on full-sized bicycle wheels. Apart from a betting shack

where improbable numbers of dollars are staked on unlikely outcomes, the poverty-stricken fishing village of today bears little relation to what went before. For once this collection of dilapidated buildings at the south-eastern tip of Jamaica was one of the most notorious places on earth. A couple of earthquakes, a terrible fire and numerous hurricanes – each said to be God's judgement on the loose morals of earlier residents – have removed most traces of its time as 'the wickedest city in the world'.

'This town is the Sodom of the New World,' wrote a seventeenth-century clergyman who made the mistake of visiting the newly established English colony, 'and since the majority of its population consists of pirates, cutthroats, whores and some of the vilest persons in the whole of the world, I felt my permanence there was of no use and I could better preach the Word of God elsewhere among a better sort of folk.' He departed on the same ship that had brought him, leaving the place to its vagabonds, escaped jailbirds and prostitutes such as the notorious 'No Conscience Nan', 'Salt-Beef Peg' and 'Buttock-de-Clink Jenny'. The place floated on a sea of rum – by 1661 the town had stirred itself to acquire a council, which, in the month of June alone, issued over forty new licences for drinking dens. (There was no need of visiting clergy because the rum they served was so strong it was known as 'Kill Devil'.) A governor of Jamaica drily observed that 'The Spaniards wondered much at the sickness of our people, until they knew of the strength of their drinks, but then they wondered more that they were not all dead.' Port Royal made the wild towns which grew up around nineteenth-century gold strikes seem like quiet country villages, for one simple reason. It was built not on digging gold out of the ground but on stealing it. This tropical Klondike flourished on maritime gangsterism. Jamaica lay 'in the Spaniard's bowels and in the heart of his trade'.

The parasitic process went like this. The Spanish robbed the Aztec and Inca empires of Central and South America, and then transported the precious metals under armed guard to the Caribbean coast, where they were loaded on to ships to be carried back to Spain. The thugs of Port Royal simply put to sea, mugged the Spanish and then scuttled back to Jamaica as fast as possible. The British were not the first into this uncertain but often immensely profitable business,

for French pirates had begun falling upon Spanish convoys soon after they started to sail for Europe from the Americas. But the British were the most ruthless, and Sir Francis Drake's prayer 'I know many means to do her Majesty good service and to make us rich, for we must have gold before we see England,' can stand as a mission-statement for all of them. When Drake finally reached home – after plundering a mule train on the Panamanian isthmus loaded with gold and silver in 1573 – not only was he rich but he soon became an English national hero. There was something about the man's free-booting spirit that chimed with the mood of a sixteenth-century England, a nation beginning to feel that being an island gave both security and opportunity: when you have no troublesome land borders (the Welsh had been 'pacified' and the Scots were increasingly more envious than dangerous), all foreigners are exotic and it is easy to feel indifferent about what your citizens do to them. For anyone willing to face the risks involved, piracy was free enterprise, red in tooth and claw, open to anyone and offering the prospect of great wealth.

Its practitioners were a hugely varied bunch. In true pirate fashion, the origins of Edward Teach – 'Blackbeard' – are obscure. His end is not: in 1718 his severed head hung from the bowsprit of a ship sent from Carolina to tackle the menace of piracy. Another pirate, Stede Bonnet, was said to have been a gentleman plantation owner who took up robbery to escape his nagging wife. (Not that it was an entirely male world: two women pirates, Anne Bonny and Mary Read, were captured and escaped the gallows only when they revealed that they were pregnant, Anne Bonny ending her days as a respectable matriarch of eighty-four.) Howel Davis had been first mate on a slaving ship. Henry Mainwaring was the son of an MP and graduate of Brasenose College, Oxford: he was neither the first nor the last man to take up the trade after being employed by the Crown to *suppress* piracy, and he helped other 'respectable' citizens to embark on piratical careers by stage-managing bogus kidnappings, so that they could, if they chose, later return to normal life. William Kidd, hanged at execution dock in Wapping in 1701, was another who had decided that joining the pirates was a more lucrative career than the commission he had been given to hunt them down.

As the fates of some of these characters indicate, the British government was in two (or more) minds about those of its citizens who found the pickings of the Spanish Main – the Caribbean Sea alongside the mainland of Spanish America – irresistible. Medieval convention allowed those who had been robbed in foreign territory and been unable to get satisfaction in court to apply for permission to recoup any losses by force of arms. From this, it was only a small step to the invention of privateering, a system by which the Admiralty Court in London granted permission to private ships to attack the vessels of Britain's enemies. In exchange for a licence to steal, the government demanded a share of the proceeds. The pith-helmeted, district-officered empire which was wound up in the twentieth century had its origins in the chaotic free enterprise of places like Port Royal. For while Jamaica may have been on the fringes of the known world, it was integral to the London Treasury and a central part of the strategy for war against Spain. This pattern of using freelances or proxies was one the British would employ time and again as they built their empire. Sometimes territories were conquered at the order of governments, but much of the time the flag was planted by licensed companies or some freebooting capitalist given a nod or a wink in London.

One of the most spectacular of these adventurers was Henry Morgan, a Welshman thought to have arrived in Jamaica in the 1650s. Morgan obtained a licence to fight the Spanish at sea, but – like many similar figures in the centuries to come – recognized that a faraway government would be almost powerless to stop him doing as he pleased, and would be likely, moreover, to thank him for it afterwards. In July 1668 he led a group of pirates in an audacious attack on the fortified town of Portobello in present-day Panama, where the Spanish unloaded the mule trains which had carried their treasure down to the coast for onward shipment by armed convoy to Europe. Military cunning and piratical enthusiasm overwhelmed Spanish unpreparedness: Morgan seized the town and in the following four weeks denuded it of spoils worth more than Jamaica's agricultural exports for an entire year. He even forced the Spanish to pay him a ransom to leave Portobello. The individual pirate's share of the plunder from Portobello was five or six times the annual wage of a seventeenth-century seaman.

When news of the raid reached London, the Spanish Ambassador wrung his hands and moaned. The British gave their characteristic performance of sympathy, mild regret and practical indifference. What, they seemed to suggest, can we do? In truth, the British had discovered that contracting out the making of war – or money – was a policy which it was much easier to start than to finish.

When they would later come to justify their empire to the world (and to themselves), the political aspects of this robbery were presented as something rather more dignified. Early pirates talked of themselves as knights on some blue-water crusade against a corrupt, barbarous and lazy Spain. When someone had the impertinence to describe Henry Morgan in print as a buccaneer he sued the publishers for libel – and won. In 1664 the British had sent a new governor to Jamaica, bearing orders to improve relations with Spain and put a stop to privateering. Fortunately for Morgan, Sir Thomas Modyford's political convictions were more than a match for the promiscuity of 'No Conscience Nan'. He had brought with him hundreds of planters to whom he promised land on which they could grow sugar to feed the immense European appetite for the stuff. But clearing the dense jungle to create sugar plantations was a slow, laborious business – even when the work was done by slaves being imported from Africa. Within weeks of his arrival and his high-sounding proclamation to ban privateering, Modyford was writing home, explaining that he had changed his mind and would accomplish his mission step by step. In fact, the new Governor had decided there was simply too much money at stake in robbery. In 1667 he appointed Morgan admiral of the privateers and was already taking a cut of the proceeds himself.

Three years later came news that at long last the feuding between Britain and Spain was over. The Spanish had been plundering the New World since before the arrival of the British, but under the terms of the Treaty of Madrid they recognized Jamaica and other British possessions in the Caribbean. The pirates in Port Royal heard of the peace agreement when it was proclaimed with a drumbeat. But peace did not last long, and in August Modyford authorized Henry Morgan to put to sea, 'to do and perform all manner of exploits,

which may tend to the preservation and quiet of this island', the sort of opaque instructions which in the centuries to come characterize so many imperial directions. Morgan's reputation meant that he had no trouble assembling the biggest gang of privateers ever brought together in the West Indies, who promptly interpreted the promotion of quiet in Jamaica as attacking Panama City, a military operation so ambitious that the Spanish had assumed it to be impossible. Had it not been for the remarkable endurance of the attackers, who sailed upriver and then marched through almost impenetrable jungle without food for four days, the Spanish would have been right about Panama City's security. But under Morgan's leadership the attackers fell upon 'the greatest mart for silver and gold in the whole world'. Although disappointed that the city was not holding more bullion, they still needed a train of 175 mules to carry their plunder down to the coast. Morgan arrived back in Port Royal in April 1671, to be greeted with the thanks of the colony and much business in the town's grogshops.

But the privateers were about to fall victim to changing fashions. The sack of Panama had been a brilliant feat of arms. But the mercantile class preferred predictable yields. Slaving, for example, was an especially lucrative and largely predictable trade. A new governor, Sir Thomas Lynch, was dispatched to Jamaica carrying orders to end privateering and to arrest Modyford and send him to England. To placate the Spanish, who were furious when they heard what had happened to Panama City, the order was extended to include the arrest of Morgan as well. The two men were shipped to England and locked up in the Tower of London. But Morgan's 'disgrace' did not last long. By 1674 he had been released and sent back to Jamaica, this time as lieutenant-governor. There, he set himself up in some style and invested in sugar production. More discreetly, he invested in the ships of other privateers, who for a while managed to go about their business under licences from the French. By 1682, under Morgan's patronage, Port Royal had become the most fortified town in English America. When he died, six years later, he had amassed a fortune which included three plantations, assorted servants and 122 slaves.

By then the privateers' days in the Caribbean were more or less

done. Some travelled to North Africa, where they joined the Barbary pirates, whose raids the British did not suppress until the nineteenth century. A few struck out west, crossed the Panamanian isthmus, hijacked boats on the Pacific shore and set off on raids down the coast of South America. An archbishop of Quito remarked that had it not been for their absence of virtue, 'the buccaneers' daring in attack, their patience in enduring all sorts of toil and hardship, their perseverance despite the most terrible setbacks and their indomitable courage [might] arouse our admiration; we might call them heroes'. There spoke the vestiges of one empire to the harbingers of another. Wild, tough, enterprising, ruthless and often very much happier when away from the land they called home, the privateers had much in common with those who followed over the next few hundred years.

Sugar was the future. Experience of growing the crop in Barbados (the island had been captured by the British in 1627) had shown the phenomenal rewards to be had: at one point, in the middle of the seventeenth century, Barbadian sugar plantations promised speedy returns of up to 50 per cent on invested capital. And Europe's appetite was apparently insatiable: in the next 150 years, British sugar consumption grew by 2,500 per cent. Sugar made tea, coffee and drinking chocolate palatable, sweetened the porridge of working people and made possible the puddings for which the country was acquiring an international reputation. The demand was more than strong enough to ride out the occasional hiccup in production caused by hurricanes, droughts or plagues of locusts.

By the time of his death in 1710 – during a punch-up among the colony's politicians – Peter Beckford, for example, was reputed to own twenty estates, over a thousand slaves and £1,500,000 in further investments. He had arrived in Jamaica as a seaman, his son was Speaker of the Jamaican assembly, a grandson became lord mayor of London and an MP and a great-grandson the exquisitely sensitive collector and creator of the neo-Gothic mansion Fonthill Abbey in Wiltshire.

The planters were not immigrants – home was thousands of miles

away. But their wealth allowed the so-called plantocracy to enjoy lives of cartoonish extravagance. As the appalled young wife of a newly arrived governor noted in her journal:

> I don't wonder now at the fever the people suffer from here – such eating and drinking I never saw! . . . I observed some of the party, to-day, eat of late breakfasts, as if they had never eaten before – a dish of tea, another of coffee, a bumper of claret, another large one of hock-negus; then Madeira, sangaree, hot and cold meat, stews and fries, hot and cold fish pickled and plain, peppers, ginger sweetmeats, acid fruit, sweet jellies – in short, it was all as astonishing as it was disgusting.

The sugar which made this self-indulgence possible was a merciless crop. Columbus had considered Jamaica the most beautiful island he had seen in the Indies. But before the fields could be planted the land needed to be cleared, dug and manured. At harvest time the cane had to be hacked down, stripped of its leaves, carried to the mill, crushed and cooked. In the early days of the plantations the labour was provided by prisoners, vagrants and indentured workers brought out from the British Isles, who toiled in the fields for a set number of years in exchange for a new life at the end. But white labourers needed to be constantly replaced. How much easier to make the back-breaking toil the task of people who could be kept at it for life, and anyway did not need to be paid. The men and women with black skins who had been seen by white adventurers along the coast of Africa would be much more resilient. Furthermore, some of the African kings were already in the habit of seizing captives and then selling them into slavery. In the 1560s Sir John Hawkins, one of the greatest of the seafarers to emerge from the English West Country, had pioneered a triangular trade, in which vessels sailed from England to Africa with a cargo of goods to be traded in Africa, picked up slaves for sale in the Spanish colonies of the Americas as a second consignment, and then returned home with a third cargo, offering a potential profit on every leg.

The British were not the first people into the slave business (some of Hawkins's slaves been captured from the Portuguese). But they came to dominate the trade. Indeed, one of the reasons that privateering began to trouble governments was the damage that investors

claimed it did to trade in human beings when in retaliation the Spanish refused to buy the slaves the British had gone to the trouble of shipping across the Atlantic. Under the treaty which ended the War of the Spanish Succession in 1713, the British demanded – and got – the Spanish contract to import slaves to their territories in the Indies. Slaving now became huge business. In the 1740s, British ships transported 200,000 men, women and children, and Liverpool was well established as the country's leading slaving port. An estimated 85 per cent of the textiles manufactured in Britain were now being shipped to Africa on the first step of the triangular trade, and in 1772 'an African merchant' claimed to the government that the slave trade was 'the foundation of our commerce, the support of our colonies, the life of our navigation, and first cause of our national industry and riches'. In the 1780s the slavers carried the staggering total of three-quarters of a million people across the Atlantic, half of them in British ships. The estimated total number of human beings torn from their homes to be turned into beasts of burden thousands of miles away is reckoned at 11 million.

Every single one of those millions was a personal tragedy of broken families, to say nothing of the physical suffering of all those involved. Even those who might have managed to stay in contact were often separated at the slave marts into which they were driven on arrival in the West Indies. Few even retained the dignity of their own name and language. On the plantations, they were woken by a bell or conch shell at perhaps four in the morning and then worked from dawn to dusk. Overseers and drivers divided the slaves into three gangs – the first, comprising the strongest men and women, did the heaviest work of digging the soil, manuring, planting and then, at harvest time, cutting their way through the fully grown fields, carrying the cut cane or toiling in the sweltering factories where it was crushed, boiled, cooled into crystals and packed. The second gang, comprising teenagers, nursing mothers and old people, followed them through the fields, clearing the debris. A third gang, of very young and very old, fed the slaves and livestock, either watching their future life acted out before them or waiting for the point when feebleness made them of no further use to their owner. Disease and hardship demanded

a constant supply of new slaves, either shipped in from Africa or bred on-site. All this to provide a luxury for the tea tables of Europe.

This system – opulence built on misery – could survive only by violence. Periodic rebellions proved that the spirit of resistance was not dead and the white population was greatly outnumbered by the slaves who made their way of life possible. Plantations could be very isolated from one another, each its own small tyranny, with orders enforced by the whip: the ingenious cruelty of some slave owners in devising ever more ghastly punishments was appalling. The most comprehensive account of white day-to-day plantation life comes from Thomas Thistlewood, who over thirty-nine years filled thousands of pages of diary with unreflective accounts of his doings each day. ('On the 7th December 1761 I paid Mr John Hutt 112 for two men and 200 for one boy and three girls. The new Negroes were soon branded with my mark TT on the right shoulder.') Thistlewood was neither a toff nor, it seems, especially badly behaved. In fact, he appears to have been less drunk less often than many of the grander estate owners. The son of a tenant farmer, he had arrived in Jamaica in April 1750 and within days had been offered a post as an overseer on one of the plantations. Unlike the slaves he supervised, Jamaica treated Thistlewood kindly and within a couple of decades this dull, brutal man had property of his own and had become a magistrate. His diaries make plain the extent to which the rape of slave women seems to have been commonplace. But what is most shocking is the malicious creativity involved in maintaining dominance. Within three months in 1756, for example, Thistlewood records that '[a slave named] Derby catched eating canes. Had him well flogged and pickled, then made Hector [another slave] shit in his mouth', that he 'rubbed Hazat with molasses and exposed him naked to the flies all day, and to the mosquitos all night', and that he 'flogged Punch well, and then washed and rubbed in salt pickle, lime juice and bird pepper; made Negro Joe piss in his eyes and mouth'.

The horrors of the Atlantic slave trade are now part of school history lessons, the cruelties the British inflicted on fellow human beings rightly taught as a cause of shame. The mechanics of the business, in which tribal chiefs collected captives from further and further into

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the interior of Africa for sale to the traders, the British creation of marshalling forts on the 'slave coast' between the Niger and Volta rivers, the disgusting conditions of the packed slaves on the 'Middle Passage' of the triangular trade and, at journey's end, the presentation of men, women and children like beasts in a market, should all be engraved on the national conscience. It is one of the most disgraceful episodes in British history. From the distance of the twenty-first century, the baffling, troublesome anxiety about it – as about some other aspects of the imperial experience – is how it was that our own forebears could have behaved like this. It illuminates the central mystery of so much of the empire: how could British people do to others what they would not have accepted being done to themselves? In the case of slavery there are only two possible explanations. Either the business was carried out in secrecy. Or those who conducted, invested in or facilitated the trade did not consider black people to be fellow human beings. The country was either ignorant or racist.

We can dismiss the first possibility. Writers from Jane Austen to Dr Johnson showed themselves plenty aware of the injustice which made the plantations viable. The wealth generated by the business was apparent everywhere. In Bristol it was said in 1685 that there was scarcely a shopkeeper in the city who did not have a stake in trade to the Americas – 'even the parsons talked of nothing but trade'. The entire British economy was transformed by slaving: traders needed credit to fund their voyages and insurance systems to protect their investment, which led to the rapid development of banking and financial services. When the Act of Union allowed Scotland to join in colonial trade, Glasgow boomed through the import of tobacco from Virginia and sugar from the West Indies, each the product of slave labour. Liverpool, though, was *the* slave city. At the height of the trade it was reckoned that over half the slaves carried by English ships had been stolen from Africa in Liverpool vessels. The city's Royal Institution 'for the promotion of Literature, Science and the Arts' was built as the home of a slaver. The Liverpool Exchange, later the Town Hall, was decorated with the carved heads of African elephants and slaves. Destitute children at the city's Bluecoat School owed their education to the forced labour of Africans. An actor who

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appeared drunk on a Liverpool stage – not for the first time – was hissed by the crowd. He steadied himself long enough to round on the audience with the words: 'I have not come here to be insulted by a set of wretches, every brick in whose infernal town is cemented with an African's blood.'

You would have had to be wilfully deaf and blind to remain ignorant of the profound change the slave trade was working in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was, in the words of one apostle, 'the mainspring of the machine which sets every wheel in motion', making possible the network of enterprises which brought tea and coffee to the sideboard, oils and wines to the lunch table, Chinese pottery and Persian silks to the drawing room. It created a wealthy commercial class with the means to shoulder aside the traditional landed aristocracy. Wealthy West Indian traders became a familiar sight about town and the subject of popular drama, their riches contaminating almost every area of national life, buying seats in parliament, building churches, funding schools and hospitals, educating orphans. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel was the proud proprietor of its own plantation in Barbados, where for a time a red-hot iron was used to brand the word 'Society' on the chests of slaves. The Society tended not to preach sermons in the colonies based on the Exodus text about the promised land.* Slave traders effectively owned much of the British political class, who secured their interests in parliament. By the middle of the eighteenth century, families which would soon claim to be the very flower of the aristocracy were showing off the enormous wealth from their plantations by throwing up or elaborating vast country houses, like the Pennant family's mock-Norman castle at Penrhyn in North Wales, the Fitzherberts' Tissington Hall in Derbyshire or the Lascelles' great pile, Harewood House – 'St Petersburg Palace on a Yorkshire hill' –

* In February 2006, the Archbishop of Canterbury apologized for the 'shame and sinfulness of our predecessors', explaining that 'the body of Christ is not just a body that exists at any one time, it exists across history'. The previous year he had apologized for the sinfulness of missionaries in imposing *Hymns Ancient and Modern* on the people of Africa. The empire is very much alive in the Anglican Church. Indeed, the tensions between its different overseas sections may well be the death of it.