

THE 1816 SLAVE REVOLT IN BARBADOS: AN EXCHANGE IN BARBADOS NEWSPAPERS

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The Barbados Slave Insurrection of 1816: Can it be properly called "Bussa's Rebellion"?
by Jerome S. Handler

[published under the editor's header: Let's Just Call it 'The 1816 Rebellion']

The term "Bussa's Rebellion" is often used in Barbados today to refer to the major slave revolt which broke out on the evening of Easter Sunday in 1816. Much has been written, especially in recent years, about this dramatic challenge to the island's slave system over 180 years ago. However, I contend that it is misleading to label this insurrection as "Bussa's Rebellion" since the term implies that Busso or Bussoe (the way his name is actually spelled in the primary historical sources), a ranger (a head slave on some plantations by the end of the 1700s; he supervised the field workers) at Bailey's plantation in St. Philip, was the prime organizer/conspirator or leader of the revolt. Although the contemporary historical evidence suggests that Busso was one of several slaves (and a few free people of color) who played roles in planning and executing the revolt, there is not one shred of contemporary written historical evidence that suggests or indicates that he had a more important role than others who were implicated or accused of having had leadership roles. In fact, the great prominence attributed to Busso is more an invention of modern scholarship.

The outlines of the revolt and many of its details are well known. Breaking out on the night of Easter Sunday, on 14 April 1816, on several plantations in St. Philip, including Baileys, the revolt rapidly spread to include plantations throughout St. Philip and good parts of Christ Church, St. George and St. John. It lasted no more than two days. By Tuesday night it had been entirely suppressed by British military forces and the island's militia. Martial law was declared on 15 April, and over a seven week period a courts-martial tried a number of the revolt's alleged leaders. Ultimately four free people of colour were executed for their alleged leadership roles, over 250 slaves lost their lives, either killed in battle or executed as a result of courts martial and in January 1817, 124 "convicts and other dangerous persons concerned in the late insurrection" were transported to Honduras and from there to Sierra Leone.

The alleged leadership included several free people of colour and a number of slaves. Among the free people, Joseph Pitt Washington Franklyn is commonly mentioned in primary sources as "the principal rebel," and he was executed on the morning of 2 July 1816. Although primary sources refer in general language to the "principal instigators" of the revolt, only Franklin is named as such; in fact, the primary source evidence for Franklin's alleged role in the revolt is far greater than the role attributed to Busso by certain modern scholars.

In this brief article, which of necessity excludes all the scholarly references, I summarize the evidence for Busso's role and the extent to which the rebellion--referred to in contemporary sources by such terms as "the late unfortunate rebellion" or this "melancholy event" but never by the name of a particular person-- can be rightfully called "Bussa's Rebellion."

In none of the many contemporary documents related in one way or the other to the revolt is the insurrection referred to as "Bussa's Rebellion"; such documents include official correspondance with the colonial office, newspaper articles and advertisements, private correspondance from managers and plantation attorneys in Barbados to absentee owners in England, narrative accounts of events, private diaries, minutes of Barbados legislative bodies, early secondary accounts derived from eyewitness reports, and papers dealing with the transport to Honduras. A number of these sources, but far from all, are cited by modern professional historians who have written about the revolt in some detail, but none of the primary sources that are cited by these historians mention the insurrection as "Bussa's Rebellion." In fact, the only primary source, and this cannot be stressed too strongly, in which the name Busso appears is in the published investigation of the rebellion that was conducted by a committee of the Barbados House of Assembly. The House appointed this committee in August, 1816, but it was not until January 1818 that a final report was delivered.

Published as a pamphlet of about 63 pages, a little more than one-third of the report is an overview of the revolt, including the committee's (and plantocracy's) perception of its alleged causes, while most of the remainder is an Appendix. This 38- page Appendix is the crucial source for historians who have written about the revolt's leadership. The Appendix includes the testimonies and depositions of 23 men. Eleven of these men are white plantation managers, ministers, and plantation medical doctors who essentially testified that the material condition of Barbadian slaves was far from the deplorable state that British emancipationists claimed. Four free people of colour testified to events they were aware of before and during the revolt, and three white militia/military officers gave evidence on events during the revolt. Included also, and crucial to the discussions by historians of the revolt's alleged leadership, are the testimonies of five slaves: Daniel, King Wiltshire, Cuffee Ned, Robert, and James Bowland.

No complete list of accused or convicted leaders is given in the House Report, but in a few testimonies several free people of colour are mentioned/implicated as having had principal roles-- among them Cain Davis, John Richard Sarjeant, a man named Roach, and Joseph Pitt Washington Francklyn (Francklin, Franklin). But, what of the slave leaders? Several slaves are mentioned or implicated as leaders, but the name of Busso/Bussoe (spelled both ways in the House Report; the spelling "Bussa" does not occur in any primary source) does not appear in any of the testimonies of the 18 white and freedmen witnesses, and only appears in three of the five testimonies given by the slaves. These three testimonies (two of which are identified as "confessions") then, are the bedrock on which any discussion of Busso must rest.

In his "examination," Daniel, a carpenter at The River plantation in St. Philip first implicates two free people (Cain Davis and John Richard Sarjeant) as leading conspirators. He mentions that about three weeks before the revolt he heard these men claim that the British government was to free the slaves, but they were not free and "they must fight for it." With respect to Busso/Bussoe, however, all he says is that he attended a dance at The River on Good Friday night. There he saw Davis and Sarjeant conversing with "Busso, belonging to Bailey's Estate" apart from other persons attending the dance; however, he admits he did not over hear their conversation. Thus, Daniel clearly implicates Davis and Sarjeant, but he says nothing further about Busso; although the implication of his testimony is that Busso was aware of the plot, Daniel provides no evidence that this, in fact, was the case.

In his relatively detailed "confession" at the court-martial, Robert, a slave at Simmons in St. Philip, implicates several slaves as leaders or fomenters of the revolt, including Nanny Grig (a woman at Simmons), and Jackey, the driver at Simmons who Robert accuses of being "one of the head men of the insurrection." The only reference Robert makes to Busso/Bussoe is that he heard Jackey say that "he [Jackey] would send to the other Drivers and Rangers, and to the head Carters about, and to Bussoe (at Bayley's), to turn out on Easter Monday to give the country a light." In sum, Robert's relatively lengthy "confession" accuses Jackey of being one of the leaders, and his only reference to Bussoe is that Jackey would send messages to a number of people, including Bussoe; thus, although Busso is mentioned in this "confession" there is no statement that his role was any more significant than that of the others.

Finally, in his "confession and deposition" James Bowland, a slave at The River plantation only mentions Bussoe in the following sentence: "That Bussoe, the ranger; King Wiltshire, the carpenter; Dick Bailey, the mason; Johnny, the standard bearer; and Johnny Cooper, a cooper; were the principal instigators of the insurrection at Bailey's." In Bowland's "confession," then, Bussoe is mentioned as one of a group of five slaves at Bailey's who played major roles in the insurrection at that plantation; however, in no way is he singled out as being more prominent than any of the others at Bailey's or of the revolt in general.

To summarize: the name Busso/Bussoe occurs in only three of the 23 testimonies in the House Report, and in these three he is certainly not singled out as the principal insurrectionist. At the most, he is mentioned as one of several slaves who were involved in the plot at Bailey's plantation. His position as "ranger" at Bayley's is only mentioned once (by James Bowland) while the other two testimonies merely identify him with Bayley's. Nowhere is Busso's birthplace mentioned and in none of the primary written sources is it claimed that he is an African.

Moreover, in the main text or conclusions drawn by the House investigating committee, that is, the first part of the Report, there is no mention or implication that Busso was the major plotter or leader of the revolt or is he singled out as the major leader or organizer. He is one of several persons (slave and free) who are accused of having had some leadership roles or who were implicated as possible leaders in one form or another, and he seems to have been one of the principals at Bailey's plantation. Although the House of Assembly was formally investigating, albeit intermittently, the insurrection for well over a year and there was much talk about the revolt on the island during its aftermath and certainly during the period of the courts-martial and executions, it is curious that the name Busso does not emerge in the many written documents that the episode generated. It is also of interest and considerable relevance that Busso is not mentioned as a leader, even in the House Report, when several slaves were accusing others of leadership roles, the name of Bussa is restricted to the three testimonies examined above. It can be also observed that the House Report contains the relatively lengthy testimony of Edward Thomas, the then manager at Baileys. He testified to show how well was the material condition of slaves at this key plantation, but his testimony does not mention any names of alleged slave leaders at Baileys. Finally, as indicated above, other primary sources on the revolt, including those cited by professional historians, never refer to the insurrection as "Bussa's Rebellion." The fact that Busso's name is singularly absent from the vast majority of primary sources and only occurs in the few places discussed above in the House Report lends further support to the view that there is no evidence for Busso's actual role in the insurrection other than his probable involvement at Bailey's.

In all, then, there is absolutely no historical evidence that Busso was the major instigator, planner, or leader of the revolt. To argue this position and to call the 1816 insurrection, "Bussa's Rebellion", as if he was the principal or dominant figure, violates the historical record. More importantly, perhaps, it does a disservice to the memory of other slaves and free people of colour who collectively wrote an important chapter in Barbados's early history by taking upon themselves the courageous and dangerous task of challenging the island's slave system.

A NOTE ON THE NAME: The name Busso/Bussu, although not the most common of slave names, was held by other slaves as well. For example, in a sample of 2,229 slave names in Barbados, there was a Bussu (also spelled Busso) at Seawell plantation in the 1790s, and a Busso lived at Guinea plantation in 1820. Although the two preceding cases were males (one born in Africa, the other in Barbados), in 1734, an owner in St. Joseph manumitted her female slave named Sarah and Sarah's daughter named Bussa. It bears stressing that it cannot be assumed that an African sounding name was necessarily associated with a slave born in Africa-- creole slaves also bore African names.

(Professor Jerome S. Handler, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy, has been conducting research in Barbados since 1960. He is the author or co-author of five books and more than 80 scholarly articles on Barbadian social history, anthropology, and archaeology).

Let's just call it 'The

THE Barbados Slave Insurrection of 1816

Can it be properly called 'Bussa's Rebellion'?

By Dr. Jerome S. Handler

THE term "Bussa's Rebellion" is often used in Barbados to refer to the major slave revolt which broke out on the evening of Easter Sunday in 1816. Much has been written in recent years about this dramatic challenge to the island's slave system.

However, I contend that it is misleading to label this insurrection "Bussa's Rebellion" since the term implies that Bussa or Bussoe (the way his name is actually spelled in the historical sources), a ringer (a head slave on some plantations by the end of the 1700s who supervised the field workers) at Bailey's on St. Philip, was the prime organizer/conspirator or leader of the revolt. Although the contemporary historical evidence suggests that Bussa was one of a number of slaves (and a few

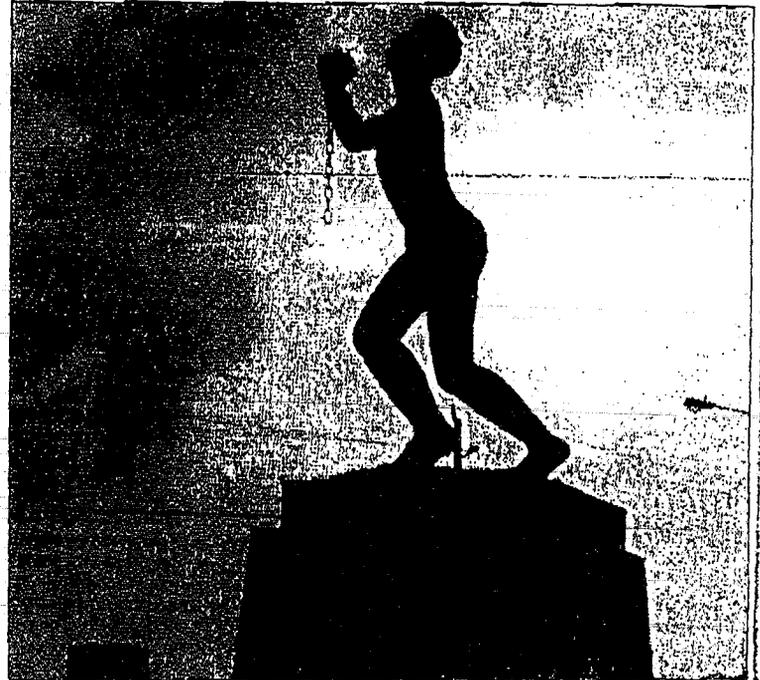
free people of color) who played roles in planning and executing the revolt, there is not one shred of contemporary documentary evidence that he had a more important role than others who were accused of leadership roles. In fact, the great prominence attributed to Bussa is more an invention of modern scholarship.

The revolt erupted on the night of April 14 on several plantations in St. Philip, including Baileys, and rapidly spread to plantations throughout St. Philip and good parts of Christ Church, St. George and St. John. It lasted no more than two days. By Tuesday night it had been entirely suppressed by British military forces and the island's militia.

Martial law was declared on April 15, and for seven weeks a court-martial tried a number of the revolt's alleged leaders. Ultimately four free people of colour were executed, over 250 slaves lost their lives, either killed in battle or executed, and in January 1817, 124 prisoners were transported to Honduras.

Franklyn played greater role

The alleged leadership included several free people of colour and a number of slaves. Among the former, Joseph Pitt Washington Franklyn is commonly mentioned in primary sources as



The Emancipation Statue at Haggatt Hall popularly, but incorrectly, known as the 'Bussa Statue'

"the principal rebel," and he was executed on July 2. Although the sources refer in general language to the "principal instigators" of the revolt, only Franklyn is named as such; in fact, the primary source evidence for Franklin's role in the revolt is far greater than the role attributed to Bussa by certain modern scholars.

Narrative accounts

In none of the many contemporary documents related to the revolt is it referred to as "Bussa's Rebellion". Such documents include official correspondence with the colonial office, newspaper articles and advertisements, private correspondence from managers and plantation attorneys in Barbados to absentees in England, narrative accounts of events, private diaries, minutes of legislative bodies, early secondary accounts derived from eyewitness reports, and papers dealing with the transport to Honduras. A number of these documents, but far from all, are cited by modern professional historians who have written about the revolt in some detail, but none of these cited primary sources call the insurrection "Bussa's Rebellion".

In fact, the only primary source, and this cannot be stressed too strongly, which mentions the name Bussa is a report on the rebellion produced by a committee of the House of Assembly.

The House appointed this committee to "enquire into the origin and cause of the late rebellion" in August, 1816, but not until January 1818 was the final report delivered and ordered published.

A pamphlet of about 63 pages, a little more than one-third of the report is an overview of the revolt, including the committee's (and plantocracy's) perception of its causes; most of the remainder is an Appendix.

source for historians who have written about the revolt's leadership. The Appendix includes the testimonies and depositions of 23 men: Eleven are white plantation managers, ministers, and medical doctors who essentially testified that the material condition of Barbadian slaves was much better than the deplorable state claimed by British emancipationists. Four free people of colour testified to events before and during the revolt, and three white militia/military officers gave evidence on events during the revolt.

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No primary source

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But, what of the slave leaders? Several slaves are mentioned or implicated as leaders, but the name of Bussa/Bussoe (spelled both ways in the House Report; the spelling "Bussa" does not occur in any primary source) does not appear in any of the testimonies of the 18 white and free coloured witnesses, and only appears in three of the five slave testimonies. These three testimonies (two of which are identified as "confessions") then, are the bedrock on which any discussion of Bussa must rest.

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1816 Rebellion'

leading conspirators. With respect to Busso, however, he only says he (Daniel) attended a dance at the River on Good Friday night. There he saw Davis and Sarjeant conversing with "Busso, belonging to Bailey's estate" apart from other persons attending the dance; however, Daniel admits he could not hear their conversation. Daniel says nothing more about Busso. Although the implication of his testimony is that Busso was aware of the plot, Daniel provides no evidence that this, in fact, was the case.

No single mention of 'Bussoe'

In his relatively detailed "confession" at the court-martial, Robert, of the names, implicates several slaves as leaders or fomenters of the revolt, including Nanny Grig (a woman at the time), and Jackey, the driver at the time; in fact, Robert accuses Jackey of being "one of the head men of the insurrection." Robert's only reference to Busso/Busso is that he heard Jackey say that "he [Jackey] would send to the other Drivers and Rangers, and to the ad Carters about, and to Bussoe (at Bayley's), to turn out on Easter Monday and give the country a light."

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To summarize: The name Busso/Busso occurs in only three of the 3 testimonies in the House Report, and in these three he is not identified as the principal insurrectionist. At the most, he is mentioned as one of several slaves who were involved in the plot at Bailey's. His position as "ranger" (not head ranger) at Bayley's is only mentioned once (by James Bowland) while the other two testimonies merely identify him with Bayley's.

Nowhere is Busso's birthplace given and none of the documentary sources claim him to be an African. Moreover, in the conclusions drawn by the House committee concerning the causes of the revolt and major events that took place as it unfolded, there is no suggestion that Busso was the major plotter or leader. Although the House formally investigated, albeit intermittently, the insurrection for well over a year and there was much talk about the revolt on the island during its aftermath, particu-

larly during the period of the court-martial and executions, the name Busso is not recorded in any of the many written documents that the episode generated.

It is also of interest and considerable relevance that Busso is not singled out as the leader in the five slave testimonies included in the House Report, when these slaves were accusing others of leadership roles. The House Report also contains the relatively lengthy testimony of Edward Thomas, the then manager at Baileys; his testimony, however, does not mention any names of alleged slave leaders at Baileys.

Finally, as indicated above, other documentary sources on the revolt, including those cited by professional historians, never refer to the insurrection as "Busso's Rebellion". The fact that Busso's name is singularly absent from the vast majority of documentary sources and only occurs in a few places in the House Report lends further support to the view that there is no evidence for Busso's actual role in the insurrection other than his probable involvement at Bailey's. In fact, we don't know what actually happened to Busso: Was he killed during the fighting at Bailey's (which is likely), executed later, or transported to Honduras? - the historical record is silent on answers to these questions.

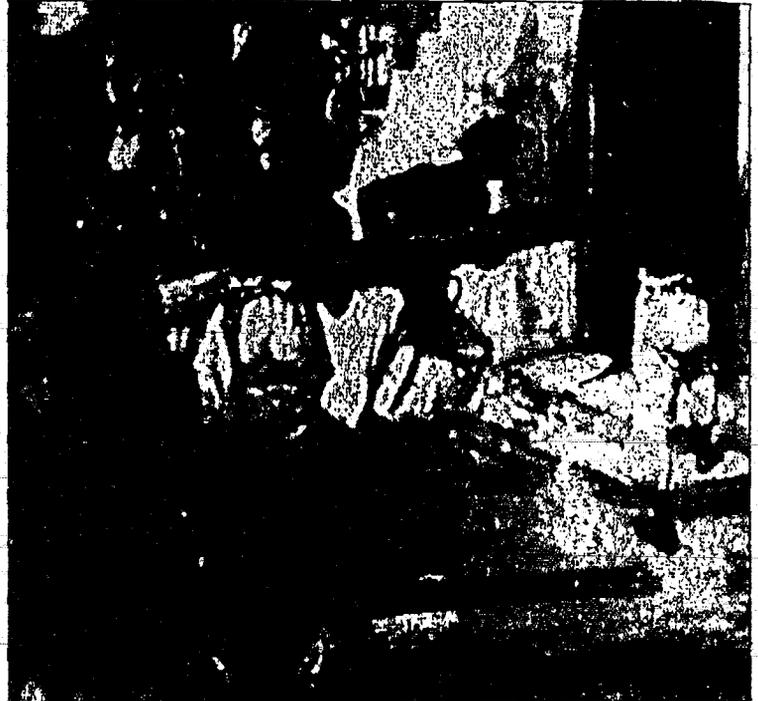
Skew of history

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Busso, Bussu, Bussa

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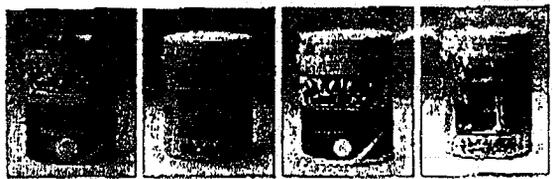


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published in the Barbados Daily Nation, April 5, 2000, pp. 32A, 33A

General Bussa
By Dr. Hilary Beckles

For nearly 20 years there has been a bitter, emotional and unprofessionally-conducted opposition by a host of history writers to my thesis that Bussa was the principal leader of the 1816 liberation struggle that left, according to one observer, "near 1,000" Blacks dead in less than a week.

Locally we heard from Ronnie Hughes and Sir Alexander Hoyos. Externally, we recently heard from Professor Jerome Handler (Virginia, United States), a longstanding writer on slave society in Barbados. His argument is essentially a restatement, with greater academic force, of that made by his local cohort.

I will demonstrate Handler's analytical weakness on the 1816 rebellion and show how it adds to the tradition of local research distortion, cover-up, and systematic denial of the evidence that is vital to an accurate understanding of Barbadian history.

The Government of Barbados has accurately and wisely declared Bussa a National Hero and the matter of historical truth and validity is of the highest importance to our civil society at this time.

To this end, myself and the younger generation of Barbadian historians under my research supervision, have taken up this agenda with more than normal academic interest.

I will first set out Professor Handler's argument as he presented it. He made the following assertions:

- i) "that it is misleading to label this insurrection Bussa's Rebellion";
- ii) there is not a shred of contemporary documentary evidence that he (Bussa) had a more important role than others who were accused of leadership roles";
- iii) "the great prominence attributed to Bussa is more an invention of modern scholarship";
- iv) "the only primary source, and this cannot be stressed too strongly, which mentions the name Bussa is a report on the rebellion by a committee of the House of Assembly".
- v) "to call the 1816 insurrection Bussa's Rebellion, as if he was the principal or dominant figure, violates the historical record".

These are strong and serious charges by Professor Handler, and he should be assessed by the extent to which they are not accurate and illustrative of inadequate research, lack of methodological sophistication and general ignorance of the data. I will demonstrate Handler's unawareness of the conclusive evidence, but first a comment on my own thesis.

Since the late 1970s I arrived at the conclusion that Bussa was understood by all races and classes in Barbados, during and after the anti-slavery rebellion, as the primary leader, and therefore was entitled to be designated as a National Hero.

My thesis was built on the following basis:

- i) that the Assembly's Report into the rebellion, in which Bussa was mentioned alongside dozens of other rebel leaders, and in which reference to the free-coloured Joseph Pitt Washington Franklin as the leader of the rebellion, is not a document to be used uncritically. It is more of a political tract to score points against Wilberforce and the English anti-slavery movement, and to justify the murder of Franklin, than a serious, reliable, presentation of facts about the rebellion. Professor Michael Craton has also agreed that it was a report intended to politically justify slavery and not a documentation of the details of the rebellion. Professor Handler, against all calls for caution, jumps in and swallows it in total without analytical scrutiny.

- ii) that we should rely instead more heavily on the evidence submitted by the English army which was stationed at the Garrison, and was responsible for the ultimate defeat of the rebels. The evidence supplied by the English military enabled me to study the day to day movement of the rebellion. I could assess the evolving strategies of troops and rebels, and show that after two days of fighting, rebels from all over the island congregated at Bayley's Plantation for instructions to carry out the final battle against the imperial troops. The insurgent forces rendezvoused at Bayley's, the rebel headquarters, because Bussa lived there and was the leader of the struggle.
- iii) the folk memory of Barbados, as Dr. Watson has conceded, has secured Bussa's place, identity, and importance. The oral history evidence, in turn, supports what we know from the military evidence that Bussa was the principal leader and that society understood and spoke of the rebellion in terms of his leadership.

Professor Handler would have us believe, quite incredibly, that it was sheer coincidence that of the 182 plantation properties listed as implicated in the rebellion, Bayley's was the gathering place for the final confrontation. He would also have us believe that notions of a folk memory of Bussa is mythical, and cannot be supported by any evidence.

The rebellion had an enormous impact upon the public of Barbados. It would be reasonable, therefore, to expect evidence of it in the documentation of the subsequent turmoil and conflict.

Also, the public's immediate literary recall of the rebellion should tell us how society understood the event, particularly the nature of its leadership.

The new evidence shows that Barbadians, black and white, wrote and spoke about Bussa as leader of the rebellion, and referred to him and no other in this record during the next attempt at rebellion and after.

The second mass rebellion in Barbados was the so-called Confederation Riots, 60 years later. In it the memory of Bussa surfaced in the official documentation and literary statement. No other person was mentioned as the leadership icon of struggle and symbol of freedom in 1816.

Four examples:

1. During the rebellious 1870s, Blacks in Barbados, though born into freedom, spoke of the fear of slavery being re-established by white military forces. A document dated July 20, 1875, signed A White Man, was sent by the Governor to the Colonial Office in England. In it mention was made of the thinking of Blacks about their slave-like condition and what they intended to do about it. The document states: "It has been whispered by those which have nothing to save and less to lose that if slavery again come, kill we will." Also, it stated: "If no notice is not taken about these written remarks, Negroes in this time does not put shot at bottom and powder at top, Bussa's Marshall Law in this age enlightened." The argument here is that Blacks led by Bussa in 1816 were ignorant of the use of gun weaponry, but 61 years later, they were fully knowledgeable [Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, 1871-76, no. 11]
2. The second of these references to Bussa is one the April 7, 1876. In a sworn statement before J. H. Leacock, JP, the bookkeeper at St. Nicholas Plantation in St. Peter described the events of a black riot at Prospect plantation on March 28. He said his companion and himself were cornered in the stable of the estate and that a "mob came in there and threatened to kill us", and that "one of the men held a stone towards my face and threatened to knock me down, saying he would not do like Bussa". The argument here is that Bussa and his followers had failed but this generation seemed more determined. [PP 1871-76, no. 4].

3. The leading political newspaper in Barbados, The Times reported as best it could the thinking and action of Blacks and Whites with respect to the race conflict. It reported statements about Whites restoring slavery and Blacks fighting for freedom. The Times in April 22, 1876, reported in conclusive language that the slave rebellion of 1816 was led by Bussa and that all Barbadians, black and white, understood this to be so, and were discussing and thinking of their history in these terms. The editor of The Times reported on the identity of Bussa within the political culture as follows: "Since the publication of our last issue, the whole island has been suddenly thrown into a state of WORD and confusion, absolutely unprecedented in the annals of Barbados. The war of General Bussa was a comparatively WORD affair and the anticipated slave retaliation at the period of Emancipation ended in smoke, whereas the present riotous movement has extended the contagion from St. Peter's parish in the north to Christ Church in the south."
4. In 1914, the literary pioneer, E. Goulburn Sinckler, published a document entitled: The Barbados Handbook. On page 18 under the title, Bussa's Rebellion, he wrote: "In 1816 an insurrection of Negro slaves, under the leadership of an African named Bussa, occurred in the parishes of St. Philip, Christ Church, St. John and St. George. It was quickly suppressed by the regular troops and the militia." Sinckler stated, however, that Franklin had planned the outbreak, but that Bussa was the leader of the war for freedom.

Here, then, I rest my case and would now wish Professor Handler, Ronnie Hughes and Sir Alexander to do likewise.

I wish to suggest, furthermore that in future we join The Times and restore to this leader of the Barbados freedom struggle the military title and rank given him by the people.

If the respected newspaper of the day recognized this was how the people of Barbados saw Bussa, then I say that today the title "General" should be retained in official reference. In light of this conclusive evidence I urge the Government of Barbados to take measures to use this military rank in the official designation of our National Hero. Should we therefore not refer to him as "The Rt. Excellent General Bussa"?

--Hilary Beckles is a professor of history at the University of the West Indies



OUR HEROES

General Bussa



by DR. HILARY BECKLES

FOR NEARLY 20 YEARS there has been a bitter, emotional and unprofessionally conducted opposition by a host of history writers to my thesis that Bussa was the principal leader of the 1816 liberation struggle that left, according to one observer, "near 1 000" Blacks dead in less than a week.

Locally, we heard from Ronnie Hughes and Sir Alexander Hloyos. Externally, we recently heard from Professor Jerome Handler (Virginia, United States), a longstanding writer on slave society in Barbados. His argument is essentially a restatement, with greater academic force, of that made by his local cohort.

I will demonstrate Handler's analytical weakness on the 1816 rebellion and show how it adds to the tradition of local research distortion, cover-up, and systematic denial of the evidence that is vital to an accurate understanding of Barbadian history.

The Government of Barbados has accurately and wisely declared Bussa a National Hero and the matter of historical truth and validity is of the highest importance to our civil society at this time.

To this end, myself and the younger generation of Barbadian historians under my research supervision, have taken up this agenda with more than normal academic interest.

Assertions

I will first set out Professor Handler's argument as he presented it.

He made the following assertions:

- i) "that it is misleading to label this insurrection Bussa's Rebellion";
- ii) "there is not a shred of contemporary documentary evidence that he (Bussa) had a more important role than others who were accused of leadership roles";
- iii) "the great prominence attributed to Bussa is more an invention of modern scholarship";
- iv) "the only primary source, and this cannot be stressed too strongly, which mentions the name

Bussa is a report on the rebellion by a committee of the House of Assembly".

v) "to call the 1816 insurrection Bussa's Rebellion, as if he was the principal or dominant figure, violates the historical record".

These are strong and serious charges by Professor Handler, and he should be assessed by the extent to which they are not accurate and illustrative of inadequate research, lack of methodological sophistication and general ignorance of the data. I will demonstrate Handler's unawareness of the conclusive evidence, but first a comment on my own thesis.

Understood by all

Since the late 1970s I arrived at the conclusion that Bussa was understood by all races and classes in Barbados, during and after the anti-slavery rebellion, as the primary leader, and therefore was entitled to be designated as a National Hero.

My thesis was built on the following basis:

i) that the Assembly's Report into the rebellion, in which Bussa was mentioned alongside dozens of other rebel leaders, and in which reference to the free-coloured Joseph Pitt, Washington Franklin as the leader of the rebellion, is not a document to be used uncritically.

It is more of a political tract to score points against Wilberforce and the English anti-slavery movement, and to justify the murder of Franklin, than a serious, reliable, presentation of facts about the rebellion.

Professor Michael Craton has also agreed that it was a report intended to politically justify slavery and not a documentation of the details of the rebellion.

Professor Handler, against all calls for caution, jumps in and swallows it in total without analytical scrutiny.

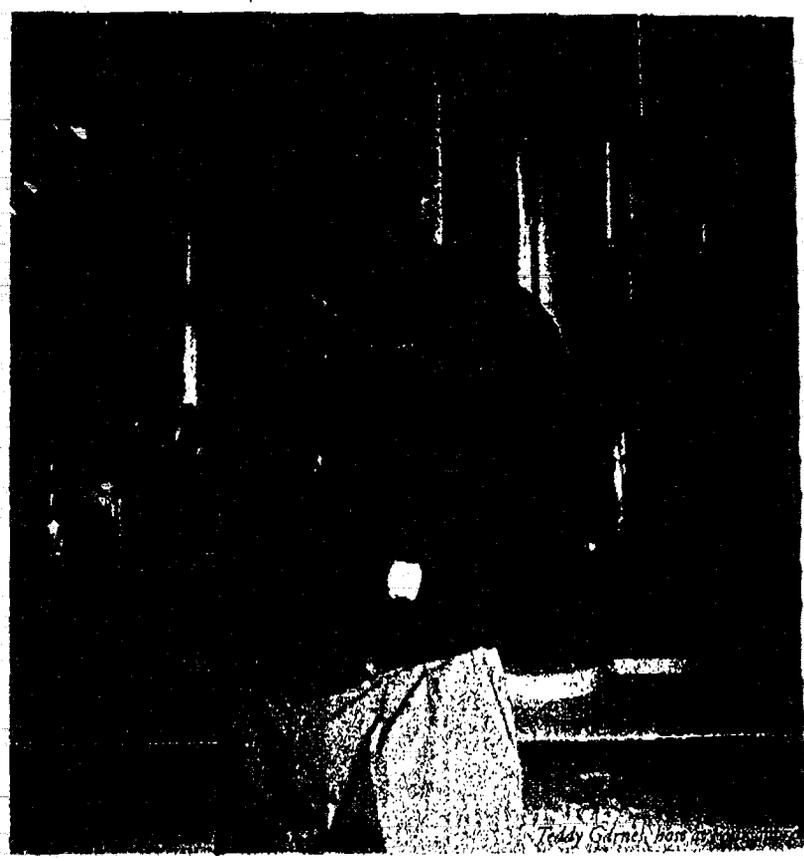
ii) that we should rely instead more heavily on the evidence submitted by the English army which was stationed at the Garrison, and was responsible for the ultimate defeat of the rebels.

The evidence supplied by the English military enabled me to study the day to day movement of the rebellion. I could assess the evolving strategies of troops and rebels, and show that after two days of fighting, rebels from all over the island congregated at Bayley's Plantation for instructions to carry out the final battle against the imperial troops.

The insurgent forces rendezvoused at Bayley's, the rebel headquarters, because Bussa lived there and was the leader of the struggle.

iii) the folk memory of Barbados, as Dr. Watson has conceded, has secured Bussa's place, identity, and importance. The oral history evidence, in turn, supports what we know

Continued on next page.



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FOR THE BRIGAND IN YOU.



OUR HEROES

'Twas Bussa, without doubt

From Page 32A.

From the military evidence that Bussa was the principal leader and that society understood and spoke the rebellion in terms of his leadership. Professor Handler would have us believe, quite credibly, that it was sheer coincidence that of the 182 plantation properties listed as implicated in the Rebellion, Bayley's was the gathering place for the final confrontation. He would also have us believe that notions of a folk memory of Bussa is mythical, and cannot be supported by any evidence.

Conclusive evidence

The rebellion had an enormous impact upon the public of Barbados. It would be reasonable, therefore, to expect evidence of it in the documentation of subsequent turmoil and conflict. Also, the public's immediate literary recall of the Rebellion should tell us how society understood the event, particularly the nature of its leadership. The new evidence shows that Barbadians, black and white, wrote and spoke about Bussa as leader of the Rebellion, and referred to him and no other in this regard during the next attempt at rebellion and after. The second mass rebellion in Barbados was the so-called 1876 Confederation Riots, 60 years later. In it the memory of Bussa surfaced in the official documentation and literary statement. No other person was mentioned as the leadership icon of struggle and symbol of freedom in 1816.

Four examples:

1. During the rebellious 1870s, Blacks in Barbados, though born into freedom, spoke of the fear of slavery being re-established by white military forces. A document dated July 20, 1875, signed *A white man*, was sent by the Governor to the Colonial Office in England. In it mention was made of the thinking of Blacks about their slave-like condition and what they intended to do about it. The document states: "It has been whispered by those which have nothing to save and less to lose that if slavery again come, kill we will." Also, it stated: "If no notice is not taken about these warning remarks, Negroes in this time does not put shot at bottom and powder at top, Bussa's Marshall Law in this age enlightened." The argument here is that Blacks led by Bussa in 1816 were ignorant of the use of gun weaponry, but 51 years later, they were fully knowledgeable. [Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, 1871-76, no.11]

2. The second of these references to Bussa is on the April 7, 1876. (April 7, 1876) a sworn statement before J.H. Leacock, JP, the keeper at St. Nicholas Plantation in St. Peter described the events of a black riot at Prospect plantation on March 28. He said his companion and himself were cornered in a stable of the estate and that a "mob came in there and threatened to kill us", and that "one of the men threw a stone towards my face and threatened to knock me down saying he would not do like Bussa". The argument here is that Bussa and his followers had died but this generation seemed more determined. [P. 1871-76, no.4]

3. The leading political newspaper in Barbados, *The Times* reported as best it could the thinking and actions of Blacks and Whites with respect to the race conflict. It reported statements about Whites restoring order and Blacks fighting for freedom. *The Times*, on April 22, 1876, reported in conclusive language that the slave rebellion of 1816 was led by Bussa and that all Barbadians, black and white, understood this to be so, and were discussing and writing of their history in these terms. The editor of *The Times* reported on the identity of Bussa within the political culture as follows: "Since the publication of our last issue, the whole island has been suddenly thrown into a state of excitement and confusion, absolutely unprecedented in the history of Barbados. The War of General Bussa was a comparatively minor affair and the anticipated slave retaliation at the period of Emancipation ended in smoke, whereas

the present riotous movement has extended the contagion from St. Peter's parish in the north to Christ Church in the south."

4. In 1914, the literary pioneer, E. Goulburn Sinckler, published a document entitled: *The Barbados Handbook*. On Page 18 under the title, *Bussa's Rebellion*, he wrote:

"In 1816 an insurrection of Negro slaves, under the leadership of an African named Bussa, occurred in the parishes of St. Philip, Christ Church, St. John and St. George. It was quickly suppressed by the regular troops and the militia."

Sinckler stated, however, that Franklin had planned the outbreak, but that Bussa was the leader of the war for freedom.

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• Hilary Beckles is a professor of history at the University of the West Indies.

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Cayenne EXPOSURE

Comment

All salute General Bussa

IT WAS ONLY a matter of time before more historical evidence came to light to expose finally the great damage done to the peoples' proper sense of their past by the modern day anti-Bussa opposition that used to its ends a cohort of historians.

The new evidence brought to light shows that it is no longer possible for them to question the other evidence which had shown that General Bussa was the one who had mobilised the people in order to uproot slavery from our civilization and set the society on the path to freedom, justice, and equality.

Why was General Bussa really denied his place, dishonoured and excluded? What really was the political agenda of this group of local writers who, backed to the hilt by an old campaigner, Professor Jerome Handler, of the United States of America, have now all been exposed?

Professor Handler joined forces with Ronnie Hughes, Karl Watson, F.A. Hoyos, and the others, to deny that Bussa was the leader of the 1816 movement. But overwhelming, additional evidence has now come to light and it is the hope of this column that they will now, after 20 years of denial, come forward, hail General Bussa, and assist with further research.

What are they now to make of this editorial carried in **The Times of Barbados**, April 22 and April 24, 1876, that confirms General Bussa as the leader of the 1816 movement?

The Times is reporting on the 1876 rebellion that is driven by workers' fears that slavery will be restored on the island.

It is a report on the rebellion that is spreading all over the island. It invokes the memory of the 1816 rebellion, and here Bussa's name resurfaces as the "General" of the peoples' army in struggle. The newspaper says that this is "attested by the oldest livers among us".

This is how the newspaper tells the account of the 1816 Rebellion which Professor Handler and Dr. Watson



chastised us for calling the "Bussa Rebellion".

Monday morning, April 24, 1876 (weekend edition). "Since the publication of our last issue, the whole island has been suddenly thrown into a state of excitement and confusion, absolutely unprecedented in the annals of Barbados, as is attested by the oldest livers among us.

"The 'war of General Bussa' was a comparatively partial affair, and the anticipated slave retaliation at the period of emancipation ended in smoke, whereas the present riotous movement has extended its contagion from St. Peter's parish in the north to Christ Church in the south."

The "war of General Bussa" in 1816 was timed as an Easter affair, and the newspaper tells us that the rebellious plan of General Green and Colonel Baird, the two black leaders of the 1876 rebellion, is also timed to take place "at or about Easter," the moment of death, resurrection and renewal.

The Times tells us, furthermore, that the white community, led by city merchants, mobilised itself at a meeting in Bridgetown which was led into armed combat by Mr. James A. Lynch and J. Gardiner Austin, Esq. The results, according to the Governor's account in the Parliamentary Papers, was the killing of the black leadership. According to the Governor:

"Smith Baird, whom the mob recognised as their 'colonel' was found 'lying dead, shot through the forehead'; also dead was the man 'Green,' being their chief, or 'general' as they called him," "having been shot

through the right lung" [British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies, 1871-76, page 84].

The people, then, knew General Bussa as their leader in the 1816 rebellion as they knew General Green and Colonel Baird as their leaders in 1876 rebellion.

General Bussa is now a **National Hero**. The research must now continue into the records of the other popular leaders.

All through the documents of 1876 we find references to Bussa, and no other leader. On April 7 the bookkeeper at St. Nicholas plantation makes reference to Bussa in a sworn statement to J.H. Leacock; he is reporting on what some Blacks had said while threatening to kill him. [Br. PP, 1871-76, no.4] The people, black, white and coloured, invoked only the memory of Bussa in the details of the 1816 rebellion.

Then, finally, what will they make of the fact that in 1914, Goulburn Sinckler in his publication, **The Barbados Handbook**, heads a section of the text "Bussa's Rebellion?" He wrote: "In 1816 an insurrection of negro slaves, under the leadership of an African named Bussa, occurred in the parishes of St. Philip, Christ Church, St. John, and St. George" (p. 18).

Professor Handler and others are now invited to assist in redressing the social and intellectual damage done by 20 years of denial and suppression of General Bussa's stature and status as our first national hero.

It is incumbent upon Ronnie Hughes and Karl Watson especially to now engage the society in an exercise of public education and consciousness raising to restore General Bussa's battered and bruised reputation.

Any other action, be it silence, continued denial, or withdrawal, will be considered unsatisfactory and unbecoming. This is now their duty, their challenge, and on which will rest their credibility as historians.

● Hilary Beckles is Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University of West Indies.



Dateline: Saturday-April-15-2000 ----- Barbados----News-General

Bussa 'Hero Of All Heroes'

by Diane Lumsden Brandis

Professor Hilary Beckles believes that “there is a political struggle to reverse the Bussa initiative, subvert the concept of national heroes, and remove Bussa from that pantheon of national hero”.

As the keynote speaker at the inaugural Bussa Memorial Lecture, entitled The Bussa Rebellion Vindicated at the Cave Hill Campus on Thursday; the historian made this promise to the capacity crowd: “I am not going to rest until this is redressed.”

He was referring to the article, Just Let's Call it the 1816 Rebellion, written by American historian Jerome Handler that appeared in the March 26 edition of the Barbados Advocate.

Beckles quoted parts of Handler's “assault” that challenged Bussa's leadership in the 1816 rebellion, and presented his research in rebuttal to Handler's written statements.

He gave examples of how his historical position is rooted in documented military evidence, oral history, analysis of actions of people involved, as well as parliamentary papers and newspaper publications of that era.

Moreover, Handler is not the only historian that Beckles has taken issue with. He also named Ronnie Hughes and Karl Watson as people who should join Handler in spending the next 20 years undoing the damage they have caused via the hostility written by them in the media, over the last 20 years.

Beckles hailed Bussa as the hero of all heroes because, “in the advancement of a civilisation, injustice must be removed”. He described Bussa as the person who took the first step in removing the injustice of slavery in Barbados and out of his efforts emerged heroes like Sara-Ann Gill and Samuel Jackman Presod.

And while he is visibly disturbed by claims which he feels distort Bussa's story, he is not taking any of it personally.

“This is not a personal attack, it is part of an orchestrated plan to keep Barbados on a particular trend in the future,” he said.

Beckles received a standing ovation from the capacity crowd which boasted a strong African presence.

However, he was not the only one who received applause for the evening. From the start of the proceedings which was organised by the Commission for Pan African Affairs, applause flowed freely and heartily.

Deputy Director of Pan African Affairs, Ikael Tafari, started the lecture off with a song called A Salute to General Bussa, accompanied by guitarist/calypsonian Legend. Tafari then passed on the musical baton to the Mighty Gabby whom he described as "one of the living heroes of Barbados, the great master lyricist and social commentator, our original natural genius".

Gabby's Riots, Burning down, Sunday School, Clement Payne, Hilary Beckles, and Emmerton were right on cue with Tafari's accolades.

Ricky Parris, also of the Commission for Pan African Affairs, delivered his poem, Savage, which was right in line, from a historical standpoint, with Beckles' lecture.

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published in the Barbados Sunday Advocate, April 16, 2000

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE AND DOGMATIC ASSERTIONS: MORE ON THE 1816 REVOLT
By Jerome S. Handler

[published under the editor's header: Evidence and Dogma]

Mr. Hilary Beckles has recently (April 5) published a lengthy commentary in the Daily Nation, rebutting my article in the Sunday Advocate (March 26) concerning the alleged leadership of the 1816 revolt. The aim of my Advocate article was straightforward: I argued that there was absolutely no documentary historical evidence that a slave named Busso was the prime organizer or leader of the 1816 slave revolt or played a greater role than others who were accused of leadership roles. I examined the very same documentary sources that Mr. Beckles and other historians have cited in their published writings and concluded that none of these sources unequivocally demonstrate the role that Mr. Beckles insists on attributing to Busso. I further argued that by singling out this one person, a disservice was done to the memory of other slaves and free people of colour who participated in this courageous action of 1816 by challenging the island's slave system. Barbadians, of course, have every right to memorialize whatever heroes they choose; my role as a scholar is to try to establish the historical truth surrounding an important event in the island's history.

As a scholar whose first article on Barbados history was published when Mr. Beckles was about 8 years old, who started his research on slave life in Barbados when Mr. Beckles was 10 years old, whose first book on the island's early history (utilized extensively, I might add, by Mr. Beckles in his own research) was published when Mr. Beckles was 16, and who continues to publish in mainstream international and refereed scholarly journals, I was more than mildly interested, in fact amused, to learn that my brief article was "illustrative of inadequate research . . . and general ignorance of the data."

In his Nation article, Mr. Beckles tells his readers that "since the late 1970s I arrived at the conclusion that Bussa was . . . the primary leader" of the revolt. Yet in a 1984 publication he quite explicitly says that he began his research on the revolt "in the summer of 1980"-- it is edifying to learn that Mr. Beckles arrived at his conclusion even before he began his research! (see Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society, vol. 37 [1984], p. 101).

For the most part Mr. Beckles merely repeats, perhaps a bit more stridently, old arguments. He chastises me for using the House of Assembly Report on the revolt in an uncritical fashion. "The Assembly's Report," Mr. Beckles says, "is not a document to be used uncritically. It is more a political tract." It is quite true that this Report was issued for the plantocracy's own self-serving reasons, but what Mr. Beckles fails to point out is that it is the ONLY source that he himself cites when discussing the alleged leaders of the revolt. All my article did was to take the VERY SOURCE that he cites and point out how the conclusions he draws could not be drawn from this very source--and this very self-evident conclusion has been reached by other professional and non-professional scholars in Barbados as well. It is regrettable that he chose not to rebut my argument on this score; he chose not to take me up in my analysis of the very testimonies upon which he himself relies. Thus, on the question of the leadership of the revolt, I am afraid it is Mr. Beckles who, in fact, "jumps in and swallows [the House Report] in total without analytic scrutiny." For example, all one has to do is to consult Mr. Beckles little book Black Rebellion in Barbados (pp. 87-120; see also his more recent Bussa: The 1816 Barbados Revolution, which even reproduces verbatim a number of the testimonies in the Report --without any critical examination) to see how overwhelmingly he relies on the House Report for any discussion of the revolt's alleged leadership. One example among several possible: on page 96 of that book Mr. Beckles presents a table "Principal Slave Organizers of the 1816 Barbados Rebellion." It does not take powerful eyesight to see that he cites ONLY ONE source for this table, and that source is the "House of Assembly Report." In constructing this table, Beckles provides no critical

examination of the House Report and of the testimonies contained within it, particularly of the slaves who were under indictment and facing possible execution; in fact, how this table is constructed is a feat of scholarly legerdemain--- one looks in vain for the "analytic scrutiny" he faults me for lacking.

As an aside, but by way of another example: In his Nation article, Mr. Beckles observes that "182 plantation properties [are] listed as implicated in the rebellion." Where, one might ask, are these properties "listed"? Why, of course, in the very House Report that he disparages as a "political tract" (curiously in his Black Rebellion, p. 111, he says there were "184 damaged estates" but in his Nation article he now tells us there were two less--- many of these properties, by the way, were small land units, hardly "estates," but it helps Mr. Beckles' historical hyperbole to call all of these properties estates.)

In his Nation article, Mr. Beckles tells us "that we should rely instead more heavily on the evidence supplied by the English [sic] army which was stationed at the Garrison, and was responsible for the ultimate defeat of the rebels." Leave aside for the moment that the Barbados militia was involved as well, but NOT ONE, repeat NOT ONE, of the British military sources that Mr. Beckles cites in his various publications mentions Busso or Bussa as the principal leader--in fact these sources don't mention any leaders at all!!! I challenge Mr. Beckles to produce one of his military sources that makes the claim for leadership that Mr. Beckles says it does.

My article in the Sunday Advocate pointed out that there is no acceptable documentary evidence that Busso was an African--a point that Beckles makes repeatedly in his earlier publications with NO supporting documentary evidence. In his Daily Nation article he conveniently does not address this issue nor provide any further evidence for his assertion of Busso's African birth. Am I to assume that he now recants on this and no longer makes any claims that Busso was African-born? In any case, he still provides NO evidence for this assertion and I challenge him to produce any evidence that would be acceptable by conventional scholarly standards.

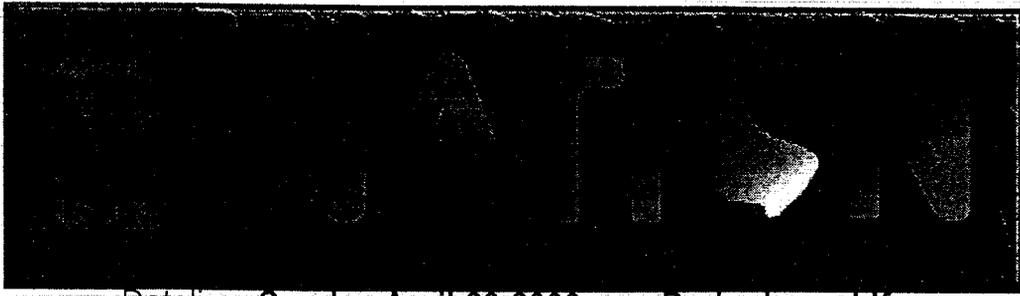
The oral tradition: Now, in what I find the most curious bit in this Nation piece is Beckles' attempts to support the view of an oral tradition concerning Bussa (it is NOT "oral history"--Mr. Beckles confuses the terms "oral history" and "oral tradition", as he also naively and imprecisely employs such terms as folk tradition, folk memory, folk hero and the like [perhaps Mr. Beckles can be excused since he was trained as an economic historian, not as a folklorist or social anthropologist]). It is ESPECIALLY curious that in all of Beckles' publications on this revolt since around 1984, not once, repeat NOT ONCE, has he mentioned any of the sources he now cites for an oral tradition. The issue of a possible oral tradition is an interesting one and I would consider it a bona fide research issue-- there is certainly evidence which I believe has been produced by some members of the U.W.I. History Department, but not by Beckles, that such a tradition existed. This is a researchable issue and I await the work of Barbadian historians. But there are a number of methodological issues: one, to establish by conventional scholarly criteria--not merely assertion--the existence of an oral tradition (as technically defined and commonly accepted in scholarly circles); two, to establish the content of that tradition; and three, to examine the extent to which the alleged oral tradition and documentary sources collaborate, support, or contradict one another. That is to say, because one can establish the existence of an oral tradition does not necessarily mean that the oral tradition accurately reflects the historical events to which it refers--this must be investigated on its own terms. To produce newspaper articles written 60 years after the 1816 revolt is suggestive, but hardly constitutes proof. To cite the Sinckler book (which was never before cited by Beckles; this book, in fact, was first published in 1912--not 1914 as stated by Mr. Beckles, in one his many mishaps when it comes to citing sources) does not constitute proof either.

The fact that in NONE of the many, many documentary sources that were written at the time of the revolt and its immediate aftermath is Busso's name mentioned, with the exception of the House of Assembly Report (which I analyzed in my Advocate article) certainly raises some suspicion--for one might justifiably ask: If there was a slave named Busso who played such a major role, why didn't his name surface in all of the documents, including the confessions of

slaves at courts-martial and the reports of military personnel, and why was he not singled out in the House Report which, after all, was designed, among other reasons, to implicate and publicize the names of the major ringleaders?

Mr. Beckles has written extensively on the 1816 revolt from the 1980s to the present. I admire his efforts to bring out of the shadows this episode in Barbados history. But Beckles stands on the shoulders of, and depends on, historians who have preceded him, particularly H. A. Vaughan, Karl Watson, and Michael Craton; a reading of Beckles will clearly reveal just how much he owes these earlier authors, though his debt to them is not always explicitly acknowledged.

"Most historians are politically engaged in one way or another," writes the eminent British historian, Eric Hobsbawm, [but] "you judge what they do not by the political intent, but by whether they produce work based on evidence" (quoted in the New York Times, April 13, 2000, p. A27). Let me be clear. I am not questioning Mr. Beckles' "political intent" (as he is prone to do with those whom he considers his adversaries and who may not agree with the way in which he does history), but rather I am questioning his use/misuse of historical evidence. Whatever the case, in NONE of Beckles' publications does he produce any evidence that would be acceptable to conventional scholarship that it was, indeed, a slave named Busso (the name Bussa does not appear in the documentary sources) who organized and led this 1816 revolt. It is regrettable that Mr. Beckles remains so adamant and dogmatic on this point. It is regrettable because Barbados deserves better scholarship on this issue and because by continuing to focus on only one person he does a disservice, as I have said before, to other slaves and free people of colour who risked (and lost) their lives in this dangerous challenge to the island's slave system many years ago.



Dateline: **Sunday-April-23-2000 ----- Barbados----Life**

Handler's Property – Village Academy

The task of reclaiming one's past through a project of correcting and rewriting history is no simple task in newly independent countries. It is always politically unpleasant for the reason that it is a central part of the ongoing liberation struggle. In the case of Barbados much is at stake as we seek to literally repossess the body and soul of our past.

Privileged historians from the colonial era considered it their right to write the text of the past. It would be naive to expect them to give up this power without a fight. They are defending an ancient world that suited their minds. When, for example, Prime Minister Arthur stated that there is no space at the heart of modern Barbados for an imperialist like Lord Nelson, he has joined the struggle for historical liberation.

On the battle field of correcting and rewriting history no prisoners are taken and there is no room for the faint hearted. The truth must be relentlessly pursued and told.

Professor Handler has been proven wrong on many occasions in the past. The evidence of this has been known for a long time to historians. But there was silence. The support he received from the local cohort was never available to those of us on the other side. But the issue of his wrongness is much larger than the project of rewriting history.

It has to do also with reclaiming the very materials and artifacts with which the history is written. It concerns the very bodies' of the people of the past and has severe implication for government and the rights of citizens.

Now that we have finally settled the struggle to unearth General Bussa from a mountain of denial and research inaccuracies, preparation is ongoing to bury once and for all Handler's interpretation of the 1816 freedom revolution. The recently-presented evidence shows conclusively that the people of Barbados, white and black, acknowledged the leader to be one "General Bussa."

Handler's response to this evidence is that he was writing history on Barbados when I was in primary school. This much is correct. For nearly 20 years, at history conferences in different parts of the world, I have been trying to encourage Handler to develop more sophisticated skills of historical interpretation.

Our problem with writing the history of Barbados, as far as I am concerned, is not private; it is public and the general public has a right to know the background and context of the debate in which we are once again engaged.

The leadership of the Barbados Museum, the national custodian of the material evidence, has also been locked in an ongoing battle with Handler for many years

on a matter that might very well shed more light on the "War of General Bussa". The Sandiford administration was petitioned to give support, but apparently could not.

Despite the protests of the director of the Museum, Ms. Alisandra Cummins, Handler who had exhumed the mortal remains of enslaved ancestors from their resting place at Newton Plantation, and took them out of the country without informing the Museum of the inventory, continues to be a problem. He has returned some bones though in a deplorable condition. The leadership of the Museum is not pleased.

Its official position is that Handler continues to hold on to more of the mortal remains of our ancestors. The University of South Illinois where Handler was based has been keen to assist by returning what was in its possession. They have handled Handler's case internally to my satisfaction.

Sandiford's government response to our protest of this development with Handler was that the country has no Antiquities Laws to prevent the digging up and removal of "slave bodies" from burial grounds.

The Plantation owners said that the slave bodies are their private property and that they have a right to dispose freely of them. In league with Handler, they gave him permission to exhume and export the Blacks' on their lands. The slaves, after all, were their private property, and as such their mortal remains continue 162 years after Emancipation and 34 years after colonialism to be treated as such.

An effect of Handlers' action has been to compromise the research potential of Barbadian students, who now wish to do their own scientific research in search of the truth.

Not only has Handler kept body parts and the cultural item placed within the graves, but he has given the field documents to the Barbados Archives on condition that no one sees or uses them without his permission.

I Hilary Beckles is Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University of West Indies.

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MORE ON THE 1816 REVOLT

By Jerome S. Handler

My impression is that Mr. Beckles has painted himself into a corner. Not being able to produce acceptable historical evidence for his dogmatic insistence that a slave named Busso was instrumental in planning and leading the 1816 revolt, he lashes out with strident rhetoric, avoids the historical issues I have previously raised in the Sunday Advocate (March 26, April 16), and engages in personal attack that has nothing to do with the issues at hand and certainly falls far short of conventional scholarly debate--even aggressive scholarly debate.

My basic position, stated in the Advocate articles, is that there is no conventionally acceptable historical evidence that a slave named Busso (the spelling "Bussa" does not appear in the documentary sources) had a more important role than others who were implicated or accused of having had leadership roles or was the major instigator, planner, or leader of the revolt. Because of this it is misleading to label the 1816 insurrection "Bussa's Rebellion". I examined and re-examined the very same documentary sources that Mr. Beckles has cited in his published writings, and have concluded that none of these sources unequivocally demonstrates the role that Mr. Beckles insists on attributing to Busso. Moreover, the available historical evidence makes it very difficult to establish the exact nature of Busso's role or even to ascertain with certainty who the primary planners and leaders were.

In advancing this thesis, I have challenged Mr. Beckles' historical scholarship and interpretations of the sources on a number of points -- he has not responded to any of my challenges directly.

- 1) I have observed that in none of the abundant number of documentary sources dealing with the revolt and its immediate aftermath has the insurrection been referred to as "Bussa's Rebellion". I have challenged Mr. Beckles to produce evidence to the contrary. He has not responded.
- 2) I have noted that the ONLY primary source in which Busso's name is mentioned is the House of Assembly's report on the revolt, and that this is the ONLY documentary source cited by Mr. Beckles in his discussions of the revolt's leadership. Nowhere in the House Report is there evidence that Bussa had a greater role to play than others. I have challenged him to produce other evidence. He has not responded.
- 3) I have examined in detail the testimonies/confessions of three slaves in the House Report that Mr. Beckles has used and which he has cited on a number of occasions. I have challenged Mr. Beckles that these testimonies/confessions do not permit the conclusions he draws, and that the conclusions concerning the revolt's leadership are not warranted by the very evidence he himself cites. He has not responded.
- 4) I have pointed out a contradiction between Mr. Beckles' assertion, on the one hand, that the House Report was a "political tract.... not a document to be used uncritically," and, on the other, his total and uncritical reliance on the Report for his discussions of the revolt's leadership. He has not responded.
- 5) I have contended that the absence ^{OF} Busso's name from the primary sources dealing with the revolt and its aftermath, and its occurrence ONLY in the few places discussed above in the House Report lends further support to the view that there is no evidence for Busso's actual role in the insurrection other than his likely involvement at Bailey's plantation. If there was a slave named Busso, I asked, why didn't Busso's name surface in at least some of the documents, including the confessions of slaves at courts-martial and the reports of military personnel, and

why was he not singled out in the House Report which was partially designed to publicize the names of the major insurrectionists? Mr. Beckles has not responded.

6) I have challenged Mr. Beckles to produce evidence for his assertion that Busso was of African birth. He makes this point repeatedly in his publications, but has never provided any supporting documentary evidence. He has not responded.

7) I have indicated and provided some suggestive evidence that an "African-sounding" name is no proof of African birth, that the name Busso/Bussu occurred on various plantations in Barbados, that it could be found among both males and females who were either of African or Barbados birth. This issue is germane to a discussion of Busso and his alleged African birth. Mr. Beckles has not responded.

8) Mr. Beckles (Nation April 5) has asserted that documents of the British military stationed at the Garrison support his view that Busso was "the leader of the struggle," and he places great stress on these documents. I challenged Mr. Beckles to produce even one such military source that makes the claim for Busso's leadership that Mr. Beckles implies it does. He has not responded.

9) I have questioned Mr. Beckles use of terms such as "oral history" and "oral tradition" and have indicated that he confuses the meaning of these terms, as he also naively and imprecisely employs such terms as folk tradition, folk memory, folk hero and the like. Mr. Beckles has not responded.

10) I suggested to Mr. Beckles some of the methodological issues and problems involved in establishing the existence of an oral tradition, and noted that even if the existence of an oral tradition can be satisfactorily established by conventional scholarly criteria, there are problems of assessing the extent to which this oral tradition reflects the historical events to which it refers. In other words, merely stating the existence of an oral tradition is not proof that the events it describes or refers to actually happened that way. He has not responded.

11) I have challenged Mr. Beckles assertion that brief and oblique newspaper references to the 1816 revolt written 60 years after the revolt constitute unequivocal evidence of an oral tradition, even though I admit that these references, and other evidence, suggest that an oral tradition possibly existed. I have argued, however, that these do not constitute definitive proof and that further research is needed. He has not responded.

12) I have pointed out to Mr. Beckles that he errs in assigning the earliest publication date to Sinckler's book, a work which he cites as evidence for an oral tradition. He has not responded.

13) I challenged Mr. Beckles for his inconsistent citation of the number of properties damaged or destroyed during the 1816 revolt (both figures he derives solely from the House Report, but only one can be correct), and for his exaggerated definition of all of these properties as "estates". He has not responded.

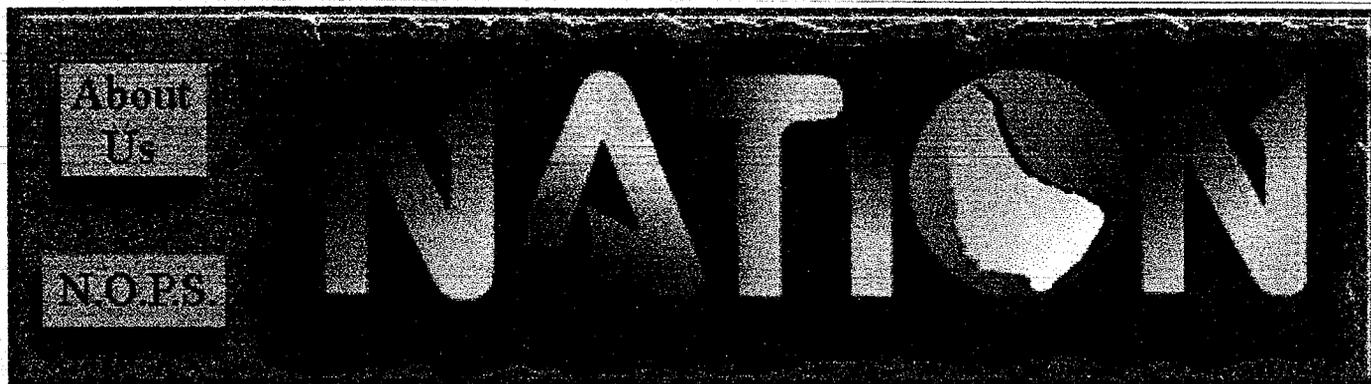
14) I have challenged Mr. Beckles to acknowledge his debt to and his dependence on historians such as H. A. Vaughan, Karl Watson, and Michael Craton who published on the revolt before he did, and who laid down the basic structures of approaching the insurrection of which Mr. Beckles' work is merely an embellishment with his own analytical slant. He has not responded.

15) I challenged Mr. Beckles to explain how he could have arrived at his conclusions concerning Busso's alleged leadership "in the late 1970s" (Nation April 5) when he admitted in a 1984 publication (Jl. of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society, vol. 37) that he only began his research on the revolt "in the summer of 1980." He has not responded.

To paraphrase a conclusion I voiced earlier and see no need to alter now since Mr. Beckles has not directly confronted any of my challenges with new evidence: In NONE of his publications does he produce any evidence that would be acceptable by conventional scholarly criteria that it was, indeed, a slave named Busso who organized and led this 1816 revolt. Mr. Beckles remains adamant on this point and insists upon constructing an edifice of historical fantasy on a very weak foundation of evidence. It is curious that no Barbadian historians, some of whom know the primary source evidence quite well, have publicly supported Mr. Beckles in his dogmatic insistence. I realize that there can be a number of reasons for this silence, but one interpretation might be that Mr. Beckles cannot find the unequivocal support for his position among his own colleagues because they can find nothing in his assertions to defend !!!

Let me end on a more personal note. For close to 40 years I have regarded Barbados as my second home. In the early 1960s I did the research for my doctoral dissertation and lived with my wife and baby son in a board and shingle house in the village of Chalky Mount for over a year. Since that time I have visited Barbados frequently and have devoted my professional scholarly career to Barbados history, specifically the life of the slaves and the island's African heritage; I started this research at a time when few scholars of the Caribbean concerned themselves with these subjects. Among my closest, oldest, and dearest friends are Barbadians, some of whom are closer to me and my children than my own biological family. I have always shared the results of my research on the island, through public lectures and TV, Rediffusion, and radio programs. All of my many research papers and notes relating to Barbados are being donated to the Department of Archives for permanent storage, and a reprint of every one of my scholarly articles has always been sent to the Barbados Archives, the Cave Hill Library, and the Barbados Museum Library.

I take particular notice of Mr. Beckles' recent [vicious, slanted, and malicious] [words deleted by editor in final copy] attack upon me and my integrity as a person and as a scholar. I will not presume to judge his motivations, but it is difficult not to conclude that these misguided and misinformed personal attacks are designed to obfuscate the historical issues I have raised and to punish me for my failure to conform to (or should I say, daring to challenge), the interpretation of the 1816 revolt that he insists is the only true interpretation. Mr. Beckles deviates from a cardinal rule of academic and scholarly discourse and it does not reflect well on him as a person, as a scholar, or as an administrative officer of the academic institution which he serves.



Dateline: Sunday-April-30-2000 ----- Barbados----Life

Handler's Property (paart 2) – Village Academy

The first part of this article appeared in last week's SUNDAY SUN.

The strategy of ensuring that the project of correcting and rewriting the historical narrative is sustainable is to ensure that a younger generation of historians is effectively trained.

Creating a school of professional Barbadian historians has therefore been a top priority. This agenda is well advanced and will have a considerable impact in the years ahead.

This development programme has been hampered by the postures and decisions made by Jerome Handler with respect to the "slave bodies" exhumed and exported from Newton Plantation.

His interest and the national interest seemed clearly at odds and, in this respect, the Barbados Museum is correct to express its deep concerns.

Kevin Farmer, who the University of the West Indies and Government has trained at great cost, and who is now the Museum's specialist in the field of historical archaeology, has not been able to gain access to the field documents relevant to the excavation that took place at Newton.

These documents should be made available to all students of history who are in a position to advance understanding of our past.

The expectation of the profession and the work of local scholars have been effectively blocked. Many collaborative colleagues in universities in the United States and Britain still marvel at how Barbados accepts this state of affairs.

Handler, then, as a working colleague, is more concerned with competitively owning and controlling the artifacts, an agenda that fits in with the thinking of the plantation interest.

The tragedy of the "slave bodies" in Handler's possession remains one of the best kept horrors of modern Caribbean academia.

Owning the narratives of our peoples' past and possessing their actual bodies have become Handler's stock in trade. Barbados history, then, is a life-and-death issue with

Handler. Even if he has lost full control over the telling of General Bussa's history, he still possesses control over parts of Bussa's people's bodies.

There is a cruel irony in much of this.

Would the plantation owners of Barbados or the Anglican church have allowed Handler to dig up our white ancestors in St. Mary's or any other place and move out of the island with bones and no official inventory?

Maybe our new Bishop, who I warmly congratulate, will assist on such matters in the quest for a better moral order.

The Government of Barbados has not yet given life to the proposed Antiquities Bill which we demanded to criminalise such activities. I have examined the bill sent forward by the Attorney-General, and it is a good one.

We keenly await its final approval.

In life our enslaved ancestors were accorded no respect. In death that disrespect continues as their bodies are dug up, put in boxes, and jetpacked off the island to research laboratories in universities that see dead bones rather than beautiful mothers, brothers, fathers and sisters.

Meanwhile, the struggle for the bodies and souls of our past continues! With Handler it is not personal. It has to do with reclaiming our past, getting the history right, and setting it in a sustainable context. As a post-independence historian of my country I see this exercise as a simple duty.

I Hilary Beckles is Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University of West Indies.

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