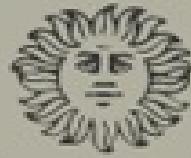


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MADISON SMARTT BELL

Toussaint Louverture

Madison Smartt Bell is the author of twelve novels and two collections of stories. *All Souls' Rising* was a finalist for the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. A professor of English and the director of the Kratz Center for Creative Writing at Goucher College, Bell lives in Baltimore, Maryland, with his family.

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A Biography

MADISON SMARTT BELL



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Toussaint Louverture, placed in the midst of rebel slaves from the beginning of the revolution of Saint Domingue, thwarted by the Spanish and the English, attached to the French, attacked by everyone, and believing himself deceived by the whole world, had early felt the necessity of making himself impenetrable. While his age served him well in this regard, nature had also done much for him ... One never knew what he was doing, if he was leaving, if he was staying; where he was going or whence he came.¹

—Général Pamphile de Lacroix

Does anyone think that men who have enjoyed the benefits of freedom would look on calmly while it is stripped from them? They bore their chains as long as they knew no better way of life than slavery. But today when they have left it, if they had a thousand lives they would sacrifice them all rather than to be again reduced to slavery ... We knew how to face danger to win our liberty; we will know how to face death to keep it.²

—Toussaint Louverture

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Introduction

As the leader of the only successful slave revolution in recorded history, and as the founder of the only independent black state in the Western Hemisphere ever to be created by former slaves, François Dominique Toussaint Louverture can fairly be called the highest-achieving African-American hero of all time. And yet, two hundred years after his death in prison and the declaration of independence of Haiti, the nation whose birth he made possible, he remains one of the least known and most poorly understood among those heroes. In the United States, at least until recently, the fame of Toussaint Louverture has not spread far beyond the black community (which was very well aware of him and his actions for two or three generations before slavery ended here). Neither Toussaint's astounding career nor the successful struggle for Haitian independence figures very prominently in standard history textbooks—despite, or perhaps because of, their critical importance from the time they began in the late eighteenth century to the time of our own Civil War.

In his own country, Toussaint Louverture is honored very highly indeed—but not unequivocally. In the pantheon of Haitian national heroes, Toussaint is just slightly diminished by the label “Precursor” of liberty and nationhood for the revolutionary slaves who took over the French colony of Saint Domingue. The title “Liberator” is reserved for Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the general ‘who took Toussaint's place in the revolutionary ‘war, ‘who presided over Haiti's declaration of independence from France, and soon after crowned himself emperor. It's true enough that Dessalines was the first man across the finish line in the race for liberty in Haiti. But without Toussaint's catalytic role, it's unlikely that Dessalines or anyone else would have known how or where to enter that race.

Today's Haiti, known until 1804 as French Saint Domingue, occupies the western third of the island of Hispaniola, or “Little Spain”—the name that Christopher Columbus gave it ‘when he first arrived in 1492. The 1.3 million Taino Indians who already lived there called their homeland Ayiti, which means “mountainous place.” Most of the Indians were peaceable Arawaks, though a community of more warlike Caribs had settled, comparatively recently, on an eastern promontory, in ‘what is today the Dominican Republic.

Hispaniola was not the first landfall in the New World for Columbus's expedition, but it was the first place ‘where he built a settlement on land, beginning ‘with timber from one of his three ships, the *Santa Maria*, ‘which had foundered in the Baie d'Acul, on Haiti's northwest coast. After their long, cramped voyage of uncertain destination, Columbus's sailors and soldiers may well have felt that they had blundered into paradise, especially since in the beginning the Arawaks received them as gods descended from the sky. Food grew on trees and the living was easy. The awestruck Arawaks were friendly, their women agreeably willing. The Spaniards were fascinated, among other things, by the pure gold ornaments these natives wore.

Columbus left one of his crews in these pleasant conditions and sailed back to Spain to report his success and to gather more men and material to exploit it. By the time he returned, in 1493, the Arawak-Spanish honeymoon had come to an ugly end. Exasperated by the abduction and rape of Arawak women, the cacique Caonabo, one of five chiefs who ruled the five kingdoms into which the Arawaks had divided the island, had launched a retaliation; the fort called La Navidad was razed and a handful of the Spaniards were slain.

This second time, Columbus arrived in Hispaniola 'with seventeen ships and two hundred men, including four priests. His patrons, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, had instructed him to convert the Indians to Christianity, and to acquire for Spain the considerable quantity of gold which their jewelry suggested they must possess. The hostilities which had broken out during Columbus's absence provided a pretext to conduct these operations by force. According to royal orders, the Arawaks were compelled to accept Christ as their savior and to labor in the mines of Cibao to extract and surrender the gold which they themselves had used only for ornament, not for money. Thirty years later, this program had reduced a native population of well over a million to something between five and ten thousand, all of whom would eventually disappear, leaving next to no trace that they had ever existed. It was one of the most vast and successful examples of genocide recorded in human history.

Columbus's second expedition also included a Spaniard named Bartolome de Las Casas, who during his first days in Hispaniola comported himself as a conquistador, and enjoyed his own team of Indian slaves. In 1506 he returned to Spain, where he took holy orders; by 1511 he had been ordained as a Dominican priest. Back in Hispaniola, with the cooperation of a few others in the Dominican order, he began to struggle, fervently if futilely, against the cruel and fatal mistreatment of the Indians.

The Spanish throne, church, and military justified the enslavement of the Indians on the grounds that they were idolatrous and barbarous, the latter point proved by their alleged practice of cannibalism (though it seems that few if any of Hispaniola's Indians ever were cannibals). An argument was borrowed from Aristotle to the effect that such benighted beings were naturally meant to be slaves. The counterarguments used by Las Casas had much in common not only with the idea of natural and universal human rights which would later drive the American, French, and Haitian revolutions, but also with the liberation theology which, a full five centuries down the road, would help bring Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide to leadership in Haiti. Las Casas believed that the Indians were as fully endowed with reason as the Europeans enslaving them, and that the so-called evangelical mission merely masked the Spanish greed for gold.

By 1517, Las Casas could see that Indian civilization and the whole Indian race were in real and imminent danger of extermination. He joined a handful of others in suggesting that the indigenous people of Hispaniola, who died like flies in conditions of slavery, might successfully be replaced by African slaves, who seemed better able to tolerate that situation. Though often blamed for it, Las Casas did not single-handedly invent the African slave trade, which the Portuguese had already begun; he was not the only one to conceive of bringing African slaves to European New World colonies, though he was one of the first. He lived long enough to recognize that the substitution of African slaves would not save Hispaniola's Indians after all, and before the end of his career he had become as much an advocate for the human rights of the African slaves as for those of the Indians. But the spirit of African slavery had been loosed from its bottle; it would take over three centuries, and many bloody wars, to put it to rest.

Haitian Vodou, which has its deepest roots in the religions of the several tribes of Africa's west coast, also makes use of a great deal of Catholic symbolism, many of the fundamentals of charismatic Christianity, and at least a few beliefs and practices of Hispaniola's indigenous Indians, some of whom did survive long enough to interact with the African-born slaves—especially in the mountain retreats of the runaway slaves who were called *matrons*, or maroons. Vodou lays a great importance on the idea of *kalfou*, or crossroads. There is understood to be a great crossroads between the world of the living and the other world inhabited by the spirits of the dead, which is considered to be quite near to our own, though invisible. Traffic through this crossroads defines a great deal of Vodouisant religious practice: spirits of the ancestors, amalgamated into more universal spirits called *Iwa*, pass through to enter the world of the living and make their needs and wishes known.

In more practical terms, quantities of time and distance in Haiti are more likely to be recognized and understood in terms of intersections, rather than the lines between them. Historically, the island of Hispaniola is a tremendously

important *kalfou*—the crossroads where Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans came together for the first time. ~~The fundamental pattern of their relationship all over the Western Hemisphere—dispossession and extermination~~ of the Indians by the Europeans, who go on to exploit the seized territory with African slave labor—was set for the first time here.

Though the Spaniards opened the channel to the New World for the African slave trade, they never really made full use of it. The conquistadors were much more interested in pure gold than in the riches that could be wrung from a labor-intensive plantation economy. Sugar production in Hispaniola did begin under Spanish rule, but by the end of the sixteenth century most of the conquistadors had moved on to the looting of gold-rich Indian empires on the South American continent. The plantation economy of Hispaniola (by this time more commonly called Santo Domingo, after its capital city in the southeast) was stagnant, and even the importation of slaves had slowed to a trickle. The continuous hard labor of growing cane and processing sugar was mostly abandoned in favor of cattle ranching.

The early Spanish voyagers in the New World had the habit of releasing a few domestic animals—goats, pigs, or cattle—on every island where they made landfall. The practice was an investment in the future: when they next visited one of these islands, months or years later, meat would be available on the hoof. In the seventeenth century there was enough wild livestock in the western third of Hispaniola (an area only sparsely settled by the Spanish) to support a group of European hunters called “buccaneers” after the fire pit, or *boucan*, over which they smoked their meat. At the same time, the island of Tortuga, just off Hispaniola, had become a permanent base for the *flibustiers*, who during Europe's frequent wars were licensed by the French government to capture enemy ships as prizes, and during peacetime captured any ships they could, as pure piracy. Despite frequent attempts, the Spaniards were unable to uproot either of these two groups.

In the Windward Islands, to Hispaniola's southeast, the French had had colonies at Martinique and Guadeloupe since 1635. In 1697 a French commander appeared in western Hispaniola, by then a de facto French colony, though unrecognized by law or treaty, to recruit from the buccaneer and *flibustier* communities for a raid on Cartagena, a prosperous Spanish port on the coast of present-day Colombia. The smashing success of this expedition was an important factor in the cession of western Hispaniola by the Spanish in the Treaty of Ryswick later the same year. The colony of French Saint Domingue now officially existed.

Once legally sanctioned, the French colonists began to turn from buccaneering and piracy toward a plantation economy, reviving the sugar production which the Spanish had let drift into dereliction. About one hundred new sugar plantations were founded in the four-year period from 1700 to 1704, and the importation of African slaves to work them increased proportionately.

Pirate and buccaneer communities were notoriously short of women, and most of the colonists who began to immigrate to the new French Saint Domingue did not bring their families with them. Their idea was not to put down permanent roots in Saint Domingue (in contrast to the British colonies on the North American continent) but to make a quick killing in the lucrative sugar trade, then return to Paris to enjoy the money. Legend has it that, in response to the request of the colonial government for white women immigrants, a boatload of prostitutes was swept from the streets of Paris and shipped to Saint Domingue. Some of these ladies, *faute de mieux*, became matriarchs of the first families of the colony.

Under these conditions, cohabitation of Frenchmen with African slave women was more or less inevitable. By 1789, 30,000 persons of mixed European-African ancestry were counted in Saint Domingue, as compared with a white population of 40,000. These mixed-blood people were sometimes called “mulattoes,” a less-than-polite term derived from the French word for “mule,” or more courteously described as “colored people”: *gens de couleur*. Under the British slave system, which the United States inherited, a person with as much as a sixteenth part of African

blood (notably, one step further than the naked eye can detect) was defined as black and thus subject to slavery. The French system, by contrast, recognized the *gens de couleur* as a third race. As the American abolitionist Wendell Phillips put it, “unlike us, the French slaveholder never forgot his child by a bondswoman. He gave him everything but his name.”¹

Some mulattoes remained in slavery, but more were freed by their fathers and became property and slave owners themselves. By 1789, the population of African slaves was estimated at 500,000 or more. A decade following the American Revolution, and just as the French Revolution began, the slaves of Saint Domingue outnumbered the white master class by at least twelve to one, and they outnumbered the combined white and colored population by at least seven to one.

Most of the wealthiest sugar planters had become absentee owners, living in France on income produced by slaves governed by professional plantation managers on site. Owners of not-quite-so-profitable plantations of indigo, cotton, or (increasingly) coffee were more likely to live in the colony, with their white families, mixed-blood families, or often enough some uneasy combination of both. These plantation owners, the cream of colonial society, were commonly called *grands blancs*, or “big whites.” Even before the whole situation was polarized by the French Revolution, there was a degree of class tension between this group and the “little whites,” or *petits blancs*, a population of merchants, artisans, sailors, international transients, and fortune seekers who mostly lived in the rapidly expanding cities and towns along the coast. The entire white community was united by fervent racism and by a mutual investment in the slave system (most *petits blancs* hoped and intended to evolve into *grands blancs*), but divided by differences of economic status and interest.

The free *gens de couleur* were socially and politically excluded by the whites (their parents) and at the same time given very considerable educational and economic support. The luckiest had been sent to France for their schooling (the home government, wary of trends that might lead to an independence movement in the colony, forbade the establishment of colleges for anyone in Saint Domingue) and owned plantations and slaves themselves. Others belonged to the artisan and petty merchant class. Colored women included a famous community of courtesans; mistresses to the most powerful white men of the colony, they were renowned for their grace, beauty, charm, and finely honed professional skill. Most *gens de couleur*, whatever their walk of life, counted relatives among both the African slaves and the European slave masters.

The *gens de couleur* outnumbered the whites in two of Saint Domingue's three provinces, and were an economic force to be reckoned throughout the colony, but regardless of their status within their group, they were all subject to the same vicious racial discrimination. As of 1789, the colored people had no political rights whatsoever, and were subject to numerous humiliating little rules. Their surnames, usually derived from white parentage, were required to carry the phrase *le dit*—a derisive “the so-called.” Colored men could not carry arms in town and were forbidden to mingle with whites in situations like church or the theater. A dress code existed for both sexes, though it was much relaxed for colored women following a strike by the notorious courtesans.

At the same time, colored men were a large majority in all branches of colonial military service. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, service in the militias and the *marechaussee* (a sort of police force that devoted much time to the capture of runaway slaves) was seen as onerous by the whites of Saint Domingue, who assiduously sought to evade it. But the military was embraced by the *gens de couleur*. For freedmen it was a way of earning respect; for others (including some slaves of undiluted African blood) it was a pathway to freedom. Though not uncommon, the freeing of slaves was frowned on by the government and discouraged by a manumission tax of between five hundred and two thousand colonial livres—a very substantial sum, payable by the slave owner. Those who served in special military missions (including support of the American Revolution at the battle of Savannah in 1779) could earn a waiver of this tax, and the *marechaussee* offered such waivers even in peacetime. An unintended and unexamined consequence of these practices was that much of the defense of the colony was placed in the hands of a race and

class which the whites of Saint Domingue were determined to oppress.

The labor-intensive plantation system of French Saint Domingue required extraordinary growth of the slave population, mainly through importation rather than new births. As many as thirty thousand new slaves arrived from Africa every year. Some slaves were able to earn their freedom, through military service, as with the *gens de couleur*, or the exercise of some particular skill which might pay down their price to their masters. In the records of the time, free blacks are hard to distinguish from free *gens de couleur*; their legal status was the same, though their social situation was not, and often the two groups are amalgamated under the designation *affranchis*, or freedmen.

Conditions for Saint Domingue's slaves were unusually harsh. The colony's geography encouraged escape. At the edge of every cane field was likely to be found the first of a seemingly infinite series of mountains, covered with near-impenetrable jungle, with rain forest at the greatest heights. It was easy enough to snatch up one's cane-cutting machete and bolt, difficult to be recaptured. The colony distinguished between *petit marronage*, where a slave might go AWOL for just a few days to visit neighboring plantations, carry out personal business, or just enjoy a taste of freedom, and *grand marronage*, where escape was permanent, or intended to be. The number and size of maroon communities in the mountains have been disputed by late-twentieth-century scholarship, but certainly there were more than a few of them. Some were quite sizable, and some, like the large group at Bahoruco, southeast of the capital of Port-au-Prince, had their independence and freedom formally recognized by the colonial government. In the beginning, some maroon groups joined Hispaniolas last surviving few Arawaks, and though the Indian bloodline was soon invisibly submerged in the African, some Indian religious and cultural practices were absorbed by the maroons. Meanwhile, the demand to recapture runaway slaves, and the need for defense against bands of maroon raiders who sometimes pillaged outlying plantations, required both the maroons and the *marechaussee* to develop a certain expertise at jungle warfare.

The American Declaration of Independence began with the famously resonant claim of natural human rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Everyone tacitly understood, however, that these rights belonged to white men, only. Thomas Jefferson believed that the right to vote should be limited to significant property holders—the North American equivalent of Saint Domingue's class of *grands blancs*. Those whom the French system recognized as *gens de couleur* were in the North American colonies considered to be (for legal purposes at least) as black as any African, and most of them were slaves. Slavery was not an issue in the American Revolution, many of whose political and military leaders, like Jefferson and Washington, came from Virginias slave-holding planter class.

Though it almost immediately started evolving into a democratizing force which would be vastly influential all over the world, the American Revolution (never mind the liberation ideology it proclaimed) began for all practical purposes as a tax revolt. This revolution had no intention to disrupt any aspect of the existing colonial class structure. Its motive was to break free of the severe economic constraints imposed by the relationship of the North American colonies to their parent country, Great Britain.

The success of the American Revolution as a tax revolt found at least a few admiring eyes among the proprietors of French Saint Domingue. France imposed a trade monopoly (called the *exclusif*) on all goods produced in the colony, as well as on most goods purchased there. Saint Domingue's producers of sugar, coffee, cotton, and indigo could have traded much more advantageously in a free market that admitted Britain, the newborn United States, and all the large and small European colonies of the surrounding islands. Between 1776 and 1789, an American-style revolutionary spirit breathed among the *grands blancs* of Saint Domingue, but it would soon be overtaken by other and much more drastic events.

The French Revolution, which erupted in the heart of the homeland rather than in some distant colony, was from the start a genuine class revolution. The lower echelons of French society—what became known as the Third Estate—were determined to reverse or annihilate the old orders of precedence, privilege, and power that emanated from

the throne, the aristocracy, and the clergy, and within the first two years of their movement they went a very long way toward doing just that. The French Revolution proclaimed “Liberty, Equality, and Brotherhood” as natural human rights, and while it was generally, tacitly understood that only white men were invited to enjoy them, this assumption was openly challenged, at the seat of the French home government, by representatives of Saint Domingue's *gens de couleur*.

In the colony of Saint Domingue, response to the outbreak of the French Revolution split predictably along class lines. The *grands blancs* were apt to be royalist and reactionary, while the *petits blancs* embraced the revolution and were quick to form Jacobin political clubs in the style of those popular in Paris. Some in the *grand blancpaity* fantasized about making the colony a protectorate of royalist Britain, or even making it an independent redoubt of the ancien regime and a refuge for emigre noblemen fleeing revolutionary France. The quarrel between these two tiny white factions grew so intense that they forgot all about the slumbering forces in the much larger population that surrounded them on every side.

In the first phases of the French Revolution there was absolutely no thought of letting the colony go or of changing anything significant about the way it operated. At this time Saint Domingue was the single richest European colony in the whole Western Hemisphere. Port-au-Prince, the capital and seat of government, was a relatively modest settlement, but Cap Francais, the cultural capital on the north coast, was the size of eighteenth-century Boston, with a beauty and grandeur that made it known as the “Jewel of the Antilles.” The sugar and coffee of Saint Domingue had not only enriched the colony's own planters, but vastly increased the prosperity of the French nation as a whole. Moreover, as revolutionary France saw its home economy disrupted and as it found itself at war with practically all the surrounding European powers, Saint Domingue was almost the only element in the whole national economy that still produced income and generally functioned as it was supposed to. Therefore the slave system in the colony, along with its systematic discrimination against colored and black freedmen, was considered to be a necessary, if evil, exception to the libertarian and egalitarian ideology which drove the revolution at home.

The French capital, meanwhile, had taken measures to discourage an independence movement. Children of colonists were required to seek their higher education in France, so that their ties to the homeland would be tightened during their formative years. The administration of Saint Domingue was divided between a military governor and a civilian intendant, placed in a situation of natural rivalry where each would serve as a check on the other; both reported, independently, to Paris. Intended to hamper colonial revolt, this deliberately engineered conflict between the civilian and the military authority actually did a great deal to destabilize the colony during the last ten years of the eighteenth century.

Conservative representatives of the colonies in Paris negotiated for Saint Domingue and the other colonial slaveholding regimes to be governed by exceptional laws that excluded the leveling terms of documents like the new French Constitution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. At the same time, however, representatives of the free *gens de couleurvrere* lobbying for the right to vote in Saint Domingue, with the support of liberals in the home government, like the Abbe Gregoire. In 1790, what became known as the “decree of March 8” actually did extend the vote to free colored men, but in sufficiently ambiguous terms that the white government in Saint Domingue felt comfortable ignoring it.

In October 1790, an *homme de couleumamed* Vincent Oge returned from France to Saint Domingue and raised an armed rebellion in Dondon, a town in the mountains east of Cap Francais. With his second in command, Jean-Baptiste Chavannes, and a couple of hundred other supporters, he captured the nearby town of Grande Riviere and from there sent an ultimatum to Cap Francais, demanding that the provisions of the decree of March 8 be honored for all free men of color. Other such risings sprang up here and there across the country, but after some skirmishing the rebellion was crushed. Oge and Chavannes were tortured to death in a public square in Le Cap: broken on the wheel, dismembered, their severed heads mounted on pikes as a warning. A season of equally ugly reprisals against

the mulatto population followed.

To the last, Oge insisted that he had nothing against slavery and had never had any intention to incite the slaves of Saint Domingue to join his rebellion—though some of his co-conspirators felt differently about the latter point. Certainly the Oge revolt would have had a much better chance of success with even a fraction of the great mass of black slaves behind it, but Oge was probably sincere in renouncing that idea; most free *gens de couleur* were as thoroughly invested in the slave system as the whites. The failure to enlist the slaves in the mulatto rebellion of 1790 was certainly a strategic mistake, though not so severe as the mis-take made by the whites. What was ultimately fatal to the whites of Saint Domingue was their obstinate refusal to make common cause with the free *gens de couleur*, whom they themselves had engendered.

In the midst of all these disruptive events, the slave population of Saint Domingue was growing by leaps and bounds, though not because of reproductive success—far from it. For various reasons, abuse of the slaves on the French sugar plantations was extraordinarily severe—much more so than in the African diaspora as whole. The production of sugar requires the milling and refining as well as the cultivation and harvesting of cane, creating a temptation to work slave crews both day and night. The Code Noir of 1685, issued in the name of the king of France, set minimum standards for the treatment of slaves, but was more often honored in the breach than in the observance. The prevalence of absentee ownership exacerbated abuse, for the on-site managers were wont to overwork the slaves to extract an extra profit for themselves and to embezzle funds and provisions meant for the slaves' support. Observers in both the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries agree that more than a third of newly imported slaves died within the first few years of their arrival in Saint Domingue.

Many planters thought it best to keep their slaves intimidated by punishments of extraordinary cruelty. Flogging was universal. Amputation of an arm or a leg was a common punishment for attempted escape; thieves might have their hands cut off. A slave who ate fruit or sugarcane in the field would be forced to work with his or her head locked in a tin cage. Some slaves were thrown alive into ovens, others buried neck-deep in the ground and left to be tormented by mosquitoes and biting ants. Still others had their anuses packed with gunpowder and exploded—a sport called “making a nigger jump.”

With life such a misery, suicide, abortion, and infanticide were shockingly common among the slaves, though these too were severely punished—even the bodies of suicides were mutilated so that they would be disfigured in the afterlife, for the whites had an inkling of the blacks' belief that death was a route to a metaphysical Africa. Even for slaves who made no attempt on their own lives, life expectancy was extremely short, thanks to overwork, malnutrition, and general abuse. Women's resistance to bringing children into the world of slavery was widespread.

Thus a huge annual importation of slaves from Africa was required to maintain a stable workforce in the colony. Between 1784 and 1790 a total of 220,000 slaves were brought in. One unintended consequence of this situation was that two-thirds of the more than half a million slaves in the colony had been born free in Africa—and nearly half of the whole slave population had been deprived of freedom within the past ten years. Therefore the atmosphere in Saint Domingue was infinitely more volatile than in other slave regimes like the United States, where by the end of the eighteenth century the majority of slaves had been born into servitude. Moreover, the example of *marronage* was ever present to the slaves of Saint Domingue. While the maroon groups were not large enough to threaten the stability of the colony on their own, the idea of them was revolutionary in the slave communities—all the more so if exaggerated—and the idea was constantly refreshed by *petits marrons* who came and went from their plantations, sometimes, it seemed, almost at will.

From 1789 on, the whites of Saint Domingue were so caught up in their own class conflict that they were careless of what they said in earshot of their slaves. Even if they had been more circumspect, it would have been very difficult to keep news of the Oge rebellion and of the revolutionary ideology sweeping over France from the slave

population. Though literacy among slaves was severely discouraged, some slaves could and certainly did read the newspapers. ~~The fevered political discussions of the whites were bound to be overhead by mistresses, household slaves, and the black overseers and managers called *comman-deurs*.~~ And indeed, the whites were at least sometimes aware of their risk. They knew they were sitting on a powder keg, and that there were open flames nearby, but none of them seemed to know what to do to prevent the increasingly inevitable explosion.

Though the written record does not say much about it, it's safe to assume that this whole situation was being quietly and carefully observed by a man then known as Toussaint Breda, his surname taken from Breda Plantation, out on the fertile Northern Plain not far from Cap Francais, where he had spent much of his life as a slave and as a manager of slaves. Toussaint claimed to be over fifty in 1789—a remarkable age for a black in Saint Domingue, where thanks to exhaustion, overwork, and abuse, most slaves died much younger. He had not only survived, but conserved all his faculties; events of the next few years would prove his health, intelligence, and vigor to be absolutely extraordinary.

Opening the Gate

On August 29, 1793, a curious proclamation emerged from Camp Turel, one of numerous small fortified positions in the mountain range that runs from Gonai'ves on Saint Domingue's west coast eastward to the Central Plateau and the Spanish frontier, and which had been occupied, since 1791, mostly by groups of revolting slaves, but sometimes by French soldiers and militiamen who were trying to suppress the revolt. The proclamation was a brief one:

Brothers and Friends,

I am Toussaint Louverture; perhaps my name has made itself known to you. I have undertaken vengeance. I want Liberty and Equality to reign in Saint Domingue. I am working to make that happen. Unite yourselves to us, brothers, and fight with us for the same cause.

Your very humble and obedient servant,

(Signed)

Toussaint Louverture.

General of the armies of the king, for the public good.¹

Probably this proclamation was not the first time that the man formerly known as Toussaint Breda had used the new surname Louverture, since it assumes that the name may already be known to his audience—but if it is not the very first time he entered this new identity into the written record, it is the first time he deliberately announced it to the general public.

Not by coincidence, August 29 was also the date that Leger Felicite Sonthonax, commissioner and chief representative of the French government then in Saint Domingue, proclaimed the abolition of slavery in the colony. The newly minted Toussaint Louverture was then officially part of the Spanish army; Spain was at war with France, and the colonists of Spanish Santo Domingo had adopted the rebel slaves of the French colony as auxiliaries in their own military. Thus, in the close of his proclamation, Toussaint was probably referring to the king of Spain, though his clustering of the words “liberty,” “equality,” and “brothers” is an intentional echo of the most familiar phrase of the French Revolution, “*liberte, egalite, fraternite*.” Moreover, and somewhat confusingly, the rebel slaves of Saint Domingue had been claiming loyalty to the king of France almost from the moment of their first rising.

Since the fall of 1791, Toussaint had been in the mountains with the revolting slaves, though before 1793 his role was not obviously prominent. The proclamation of Camp Turel was his first deliberate effort to call attention to himself and the part he intended to play. Though Toussaint had been fighting a guerrilla war against the French for nearly two years, the timing of the proclamation suggests that he must have known in advance that Sonthonax would abolish slavery and when he was going to do it. What he meant to convey, in his line

and between them, was that Toussaint Louverture, a black man born into slavery in the colony, was the true apostle of liberty here—not the white commissioner Sonthonax, who had only recently arrived from France.

Toussaint Breda had been a trusted retainer on Breda Plantation, near Haut du Cap, and on a short distance from the port of Cap Francais. He served as coachman for Breda's French manager, Bayon de Libertat—an important role, since coachmen often carried messages for their masters, alone and on their own responsibility. In his additional role of *commandeur* Toussaint enjoyed considerable authority over the majority of more ordinary slaves on the plantation. Such *com-mandeursvrere* responsible for organizing and directing work gangs and often had other managerial duties. Surprisingly, they were allowed to carry swords, as an emblem of their authority and perhaps as a practical tool of enforcement as well.

Nocturnal gatherings of Saint Domingue's slaves were prohibited in theory, but often tolerated in practice, as a means of defusing tensions that might otherwise be released in the rebellion which all the French colonists had excellent reason to fear. Commonly called “*café endas*,” these gatherings featured drumming and dancing and sometimes competitive stick fighting and were officially regarded by the French as innocuous peasant dances—though some observers did report that rituals drawn from African religion were performed on these occasions.

On the night of August 14, 1791, an assembly of *commandeurs* took place in a wooded area called Bois Cai'man, or Crocodile Forest, part of the Lenormand de Mezy Plantation in Morne Rouge, on the border of the richest cane-growing area in all Saint Domingue, the Northern Plain. The *commandeurs* came from all the important plantations of the Northern Plain and the foothills surrounding it: Limbe, Quartier Morin, Petite Anse, Port Margot, and Limonade. Their purpose, confessed to the French colonists by a couple of conspirators captured several days later, was to plan an enormous insurrection that would lay waste to the entire Northern Department of Saint Domingue and annihilate the white population.

This practical purpose of the meeting at Bois Caiman was set down on paper by European reporters, soon after the fact; Haitian oral tradition holds, with equal conviction, that the most important event that took place there was a huge Vodou ceremony. In real time, it had taken a century of slavery in Saint Domingue to consolidate the religions of various African tribes (along with a dusting of the Catholicism to which all slaves were theoretically supposed to be converted) into a single religion which all the slaves could share. The legend of Bois Cai'man makes this transformation happen in one apocalyptic day.

Vodou practitioners believe that the souls of the dead do not depart. Instead they go into a parallel universe invisible to the living, but quite nearby—and not impossible to reach. Ceremonial observance begins with opening the gateways between the visible and the invisible worlds. When the passage is open, spirits constituted from the vast reservoir of spiritual energy into which the souls of the dead have pooled begin to pass through it into the world of the living. These spirits, called either *Iwa* or *zanj*, cover the range of personalities of any polytheistic pantheon, or may as easily be identified with the archetypes of the collective unconscious. Aided by hypnotic chanting and drumming, the *Iwa* take possession of the bodies of their human believers and servants, suppressing the individual consciousness of the people.

they “mount” and often endowing them with superhuman powers for the duration of the ride. Tradition has it that the angriest, most warlike spirits appeared at Bois Caiman: Ogou Ferraille, Ezili Ge Rouj. The *Iwa* lent their power to the rebellion being planned; a black pig was sacrificed to seal the compact.

Toussaint Breda belonged to the class of *commandeurs* who presented themselves as leaders of the insurrection, but whether he attended the meeting at Bois Caiman has never been known for sure. Almost certainly, given his position of trust and authority among both blacks and whites, among slaves and free, he would have been well aware of which way the winds were blowing and that an insurrection was being planned. As for the Vodou element of the meeting, Toussaint's ostentatiously devout Catholicism might have kept him away from an African, pagan rite.* On the other hand, from the 1700s until now, many if not most blacks in Haiti have practiced Vodou and Catholicism simultaneously with next to no discomfort or sense of paradox in the combination. In fact, the two practices are often seen as different aspects of the same religion.

If Toussaint was present at Bois Caiman, he remained invisibly in the background. A slave named Boukman Dutty presided; he had been sold, as a troublemaker, from Jamaica. Most likely his offense was sorcery. Legend claims that he was one of the comparatively few Muslim slaves in the West Indies and that his name is a slight French distortion of the English “Bookman,” which implies that he knew how to read. Other *commandeurs* known to have been present are Jean-François Papillon, Georges Biassou, and Jeannot Billet; these three and Boukman himself were the most prominent leaders in the first weeks of the insurrection, which broke out with explosive violence on the night of August 22.

By dawn of August 23, the whole Northern Plain was devastated, the cane fields and sugar refineries ablaze. The disaster was first announced to Cap Francais by the arrival of a rolling cloud of black smoke, out of which the first battered refugees emerged. Any whites who could not escape to the fortified towns of the coast were slaughtered, some sawed in half between planks, others strung up on steel hooks by their jawbones, still others simply hacked to pieces or burned alive in their houses. Haitian historians have argued that the reports of fetuses cut from the womb and of infants impaled and carried on pikes amount to no more than French propaganda, but such atrocities were also reported during white French reprisals on the *gens de couleur* in the aftermath of the Oge rebellion. Murderous assaults on the newborn and unborn occur the world over as signals of genocidal intent. The August 1791 uprising was among other things the first engagement in a three-way genocidal race war in which each of Saint Domingue's three races—the white, the black, and the *gens de couleur*—would do its absolute worst to exterminate the other two.

No one has ever been able to say for certain just where Toussaint Breda was during the initial tumult. If he did have a hand in the August insurrection, he kept it very well hidden. In the midst of the bloody, fiery vengeance that the rebel slaves were taking on their masters, some slaves remained loyally on their plantations and did their best to protect the white families there. Apparently Toussaint remained quietly at Breda Plantation for at least one month after the rebellion first erupted in late August. Curiously, the river of fire and blood flowing over the Northern Plain to lap against the hastily bolstered fortifications of Le Cap

seems to have parted around Breda, leaving it more or less intact. Still more curiously, on 22 of Bredas 318 slaves decamped in the early days of the rebellion. The rest stayed—with Toussaint—to protect the plantation and its white mistress, Madame de Libertat.

In 1799 a letter appeared in the French newspaper *Le Moniteur*, describing Toussaint's conduct during the turbulence of 1791. Though unsigned, it could hardly have been written by anyone other than Breda's manager, Bayon de Libertat.

Eight days before the insurrection on the Le Cap plain, some blacks of the neighboring plantation set fire to four fields of cane ... I was at that moment on my plantation seven leagues distant from Le Cap; Toussaint and the commandeur Bruno, invariably attached to the interests of their masters, succeeded in stopping the fire without any other help than that of the blacks of the plantation. When I arrived the next evening, all the scorched cane had been cut and pressed, and they were just finishing cooking the sugar which had been extracted from it. Toussaint came before me with a pained expression and said, "We have had an accident, but don't alarm yourself, the loss is not serious; I wanted to spare you the sight of it when you arrived, but you have come too soon." I leave it to the reader to weigh these words.

Toussaint displayed an inexpressible joy to see me constantly in the midst of the blacks, giving them my orders to arouse their vigilance and their courage—and this at a time when it was enough to be white to be massacred.²

Toussaint's ability to keep order and conduct business as usual, in the midst of the anarchy that had engulfed the surrounding region, seems altogether extraordinary. But sometime after the fall of 1791, he left Breda, crossed the ash-strewn ruins of the Northern Plain, and went up into the mountains of Grande Riviere, where he joined a band of rebel slaves led by Biassou. At first he served Biassou as a secretary; later he was given the title of *medecin general*, or general doctor. At Breda Plantation and the surrounding area, Toussaint had the reputation of an excellent veterinarian, especially for horses, and he was also recognized as a *doktefey*—literally "leaf doctor." Along with substantial skill in African/Creole herb medicine, he seems to have had some instruction in European doctoring.

If Toussaint did any fighting when he first joined Biassou, he was not much noticed as a leader; no white observers picked him out of the fray. However, a couple of his surviving letters suggest that he already had more authority among the rebels than he wanted to be known outside that group. To Biassou he writes on October 4, 1791:

My dear friend,

I have received your letter with pleasure; I cannot agree to your rendezvous; we are not able to leave our camp, for both of us to travel to meet the Spaniard. If this Spaniard has something to communicate to me, he has only to get himself to my camp; as for myself, I don't have time to appear; I wish you the most perfect health and am for life your friend.³

Though Toussaint modestly signs this letter "Medecin General," at a time when Jean-François and Biassou had declared themselves "Generalissime" and the like, there is no sign that he was under Biassou's orders—on the contrary, the message seems to pass between equals. Later on, when relations between the rebel slaves and the military of Spanish Santo Domingo had become more official, Toussaint would explain himself more fully to the Spanish colonists.

governor: "I reported and accounted for my operations to General Biassou, not at all because I considered myself to be his subordinate, but for love of the good, being familiar with his impetuous, muddle-headed, thoughtless character, likely to do more harm than good, as he demonstrated under circumstances."⁴

Toussaint wrote to Biassou again on October 15, 1791, referring obscurely to what seemed to have been a planned attack on the outskirts of Cap Francais, if not on the town itself. The letter implies, though lightly, that Biassou may have been pushed too far in this direction by the rebels' Spanish contacts; in the event, the attack did not take place.

My Very Dear Friend,

After the requests which I have just made to the Spaniard, and as I am waiting day by day for the things which I asked for, I beg you to wait until we should be in better shape before we undertake what you have had the friendliness to write me about. I would very much like to go for it, but I would like to have, on all the plantations, enough crowbars to roll rocks down from the mountains of Haut du Cap, to hinder them [the enemy] from approaching us, for I believe there is no other way, unless we expose our people to butchery. I beg you to make certain that you will have the spy you have sent explain very well the location of the powder magazine of Haut du Cap, so that we can succeed in seizing the powder; my good friend, you can see from the above that I am taking every precaution in this affair; and you may say as much to Boukman; as for Jean-François he can always keep going on carriage rides with the ladies, and he has not even done me the honor to write me a word for several days. I am even astounded by that. If you need rum, I will send it to you whenever you want, but be careful how you manage it; you know that you must not give them [the rank and file of the rebel slaves] so much that they are deranged by it. Send me some carts, for I need them to haul wood to build cabins at La Tannerie to house my people.⁵

Though this letter is also signed "Medecin General," it is noticeably devoid of medical concerns (apart from the judicious ration of rum). In both tone and content it shows Toussaint, behind the scenes of the revolt, to be confident of an authority comparable to that of the recognized chiefs: Boukman, Biassou, and Jean-François. Not only is he in regular communication with the top leaders of the rebellion, but he is also enough their equal that he can make sport of one in a letter to another. He has considerable supplies under his control and an interest and ability to procure more. Already he has begun to fortify his camp at La Tannerie, an important post at the bottom of the gorge of Grand Gilles, which protects the approaches to Dondon above and the passes to the Black Mountains and the Central Plateau beyond, and which would be the theater of important engagements in the months to come.

Moreover, this letter provides an interesting glimpse of the military situation of the rebel slaves in the fall of 1791. The leaders lacked firearms and powder—in the beginning they had only what they could capture from the whites—and they had very few men skilled in the use of musket or cannon. By October, the Spanish had begun to furnish some munitions, but the opaque references in Toussaint's letter suggest that this supply line was not very reliable.

In the beginning, when the rebels had been able to overwhelm better armed and trained opponents by the sheer force of their numbers (but with a terrible loss of life), Toussaint had stayed well out of it. At the time the letter was written, he had begun to develop a strategy

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