An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti

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INTRODUCTION

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On October 24, 1797, an aging captain of the Third West India Regiment stepped ashore from HMS Hannibal at Mole St. Nicholas, the “Gibraltar of the Antilles” and bastion of the British occupation of St. Domingo.1 A sojourn of several months would change his life and inspire An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti (1805), the first complete account in English of the Haitian Revolution. Captain Marcus Rainsford had been in St. Domingo before, in 1796. Then he was mustering black troops for the British army, there to prop up and grab the colony. Rainsford returned at a difficult time. The occupation had proven a magnificent waste of soldiers’ lives and British pounds Sterling, and life at the Mole was turning precarious. The “brigands,” as the British called revolutionary blacks, were pounding at the door. “So closely were we surrounded by the Brigands, at all points,” wrote Rainsford, “that it was not possible to move half a mile from the town, without extreme danger while all within was wretchedness of every description!”2 A hard destiny came calling. In 1798 those black freedom fighters would evict the British and with them slavery from the French colony of St. Domingo. Five years later they would proclaim to the world the free and independent nation of Haiti.

Occupational Hazards

Rainsford’s account of the Haitian Revolution is the creature of a convulsive period of Atlantic history.3 As the eighteenth century drew to a close Britain was waging war with Republican France to defend its vaunted liberties and to buttress its sagging empire. The loss of its thirteen North American colonies in 1783 had delivered England an economic and moral blow. With the eruption in 1789 of revolution in France, which scattered sparks of insurrection throughout the Atlantic world, the 1790s would become a time of opportunity for both the empire and its enemies. The West Indies would witness a struggle between the forces of slavery and freedom. Europe’s great colonial powers—England, Spain, and France—jockeyed for advantage and superiority. The focus of their rivalry: the sumptuous French colony of St. Domingo on the island of Hispaniola. The insurrection that blazed up there in August
1791 ignited dreams not just of freedom but of colonial dominion, too. During the thirteen years of fighting that followed, England, Spain, and France would all make military bids to possess the richest colony in the Caribbean.4

The British bid was driven by economic opportunism. By the late eighteenth century Great Britain seemed to many Britons an island of freedom in a sea of slavery. The Somerset decision of 1772 had declared it a crime to return Africans to slavery in the Caribbean colonies against their will. An insurgent abolitionist movement was gaining popularity, driven by doubts about empire that came with American independence.5 In the colonies of the West Indies, however, slavery was still a way of life. In 1791, for instance, one quarter of a million enslaved Africans inhabited Jamaica. Throughout the 1790s their ratio to whites remained just under ten to one.6 Sugar production required those numbers. It was labor intensive and uniquely specialized, a harbinger of a coming industrialization. Along with other exotic commodities (coffee, indigo, and cotton), sugar was an engine of Britain’s imperial and cultural expansion.7 Revolutionary unrest in St. Domingo, only 257 nautical miles east of Jamaica, made the richest sugar colony in the Caribbean seem ripe for the picking. With Republican France’s declaration of war in 1793, Britain had the excuse it needed to add this prize to its colonial possessions.

“Rule Britannia! rule the waves: / Britons never will be slaves”: the famous lines from the de facto anthem of the British empire proclaim its complicated relationship to African slavery. Britons may never have been slaves, but many a British merchant bought and sold them, trafficking in Africans across the Atlantic with the indifference that comes with habit and huge profits. The years 1793 to 1798 mark a curious interlude in the mythology of British liberty. While abolitionists at home fought to outlaw the slave trade and deal slavery a deathblow, British soldiers in St. Domingo fought even more fiercely to perpetuate them. Such was the Janus face of slavery. However questionable, the slave system appeared too profitable to stop. So when in January of 1793 French planters from St. Domingo, their fields smoldering and their future dim, appealed for relief to William Pitt’s government, an opportunity arose that was too promising to resist. Intervene in St. Domingo. Hoist the Union Jack over the charred and stubbled cane fields. Enter its ports to tame a brigand horde bent on destroying property and achieving freedom. Rescue a desolate plantocracy and replace the rule of France.

A prize beyond imagining: French St. Domingo, jewel of the Antilles, by far the most opulent colony of the West Indies. There were of course other motives for intervention: the menace of rebellion in nearby Jamaica, Britain’s most profitable slave colony, and the necessity of victory in the war with France. St. Domingo was a chance Pitt and his secretary of state for war
Henry Dundas had to take. When a hundred more French planters joined the call for aid the British government signed a set of propositions authorizing the occupation of St. Domingo. By September 1793 redcoats were disembarking at Jérémie, welcomed ashore by inspiring strains of “Long live the English!” Britain’s most determined defense of slavery had begun.

At first things went well. Within eight months of landing, the British occupied one-third of the island, securing not only Mole St. Nicholas in the north, but also the port towns of Saint Marc, Port-au-Prince, Léogane, and Tiburon. The French colony of St. Domingo wore a fringe of British invaders. Their hold over this territory was, however, tenuous. In the estimation of J. W. Fortescue, the invasion force itself “never numbered more than nine hundred effective soldiers.”9 Lacking the numbers needed to secure the colony, the occupiers played a military shell game, sending troops here and there in groups of varying size to shore up shaky defenses. The arrival of reinforcements swelled the ranks in Port-au-Prince to 3,500, with 1,800 more soldiers, mostly cavalry, distributed up and down the coast. But a promise of 2,000 more troops from England failed to materialize until 1796, bad planning and worse weather hampering their departure.10 Although the redcoats could boast impressive early success, they remained outnumbered and hemmed in throughout St. Domingo by a patchwork of determined enemies: French revolutionaries, Spanish auxiliaries, and those so-called brigands, formidable black insurgents fighting for a freedom the British had come to deny them.

Events contemporary with the occupation ensured that slavery would be its raison d’être. Just weeks before the British arrived, the Jacobin commissioner at Cape François, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, issued a decree abolishing slavery throughout St. Domingo. In February 1794 the National Convention in Paris followed suit, declaring that “all men, without distinction of color, domiciled in the colonies, are French citizens, and enjoy all the rights assured under the Constitution.”11 Blacks were no longer brigands savagely torching their masters’ property. They were free people fighting for their rights as French citizens. Armed with musket, bayonet, and cannon, the British stood between them and liberty, a fortified line dividing slavery from freedom, black slaves from white masters. That the British government was comfortable defending the white side of that line appears most clearly in the notorious fourth clause of the Capitulation that was required signing for all French who committed themselves to the arms of their protectors: “Men of color will have all the privileges this class enjoys in English colonies”—which is to say no privileges at all.12 If that could be said of racially mixed people of color, then blacks obviously stood beyond the pale of British citizenship. To defend slavery on St. Domingo was to live or die for white privilege.
The British thus faced a formidably motivated adversary, and it wasn’t long before military momentum shifted toward the French revolutionaries with their newly emancipated black troops. Marcus Rainsford played a small but revealing part in this dubious military drama. The book that came out of it, An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti, is remarkable for acknowledging the intelligence and effectiveness of those black soldiers. A career officer who had been stationed in Jamaica between actions in the American War for Independence and the horrific winter campaign of 1793–94 against France in the Netherlands, Rainsford was appointed captain in June 1795 to the Third West India Regiment, one of six new units destined for action in the West Indies. A British—which is to say white—officer, he would recruit black rank and file. The fierce resistance of mulatto and black fighters in St. Domingo convinced military leadership to fight fire with fire, blacks with blacks. Rainsford would muster them to the British cause. The scheme was not without precedent. African loyalists fought during the Revolutionary War, drawn to serve by the promise of freedom. Blacks were used in Jamaica as military pioneers, laborers, and artificers attached to white companies. But what the historian Roger Norman Buckley calls “the Africanization of the British military” began in earnest during the occupation of St. Domingo.

There were other motives too for mustering black troops: the belief that Africans were better suited than Europeans to the demands of warfare in tropical climes, not to mention the simple need to maximize numbers where the British army was outgunned. Rainsford would help build the black West India Regiments, which military leaders believed would carry the day against seasoned rebels throughout the West Indies. These regiments would be nearly 9,000 strong, trained and equipped like Europeans. They would not of course be paid like Europeans. They would serve according to terms Britain traditionally granted their kind: room, board, and a decent burial. The war secretary Dundas opposed granting blacks freedom for military service.

The Africanization of the British military followed, at least initially, plantation logic: the West India Regiments would be mobilized plantations of soldier-slaves, free only to serve and die. Black recruits in St. Domingo, however, so frequently deserted to the freedom-granting French that Dundas was forced grudgingly to offer them freedom for five years of service. His attachment to the plantation model persisted nevertheless. In 1798 he supported a simpler method of mustering than recruitment: “Negroes should be procured at the expense of the Government.” To advance British interests in the West Indies, Dundas was ready to purchase an army of enslaved Africans.

The Third West India Regiment, also known as Keppel’s, was destined for St. Domingo. As captain and recruiter, Rainsford would be in regular, direct
contact with black troops. He would also witness the withering of Britain’s dream to possess the colony. For every soldier who arrived by ship in St. Domingo, it seemed, another departed—in a coffin. Battle casualties were a secondary cause. Yellow fever stalked unseasoned European recruits implacably, striking quick and fell. Although quiescent during the early months of the occupation, it woke with fury as redcoats took up positions in the miasmic flats around Port-au-Prince. With the disembarkation in early June 1794 of infected troops from Martinique, an epidemic was in the making. Over 2,000 soldiers died that year in St. Domingo, the majority from disease; in 1795, more than 3,000. Numbers climbed steadily, until by the end of the occupation in 1798, of over 20,500 men sent to St. Domingo, 12,500 were dead, some from bullets and grapeshot, some from fatigue, but over half from yellow fever.

It was a nasty death. Thomas Phipps Howard, a lieutenant in the York Hussars stationed in St. Domingo from 1796 to 1798, gives a grisly description in his journal. To redcoats in the vicinity of the port of Saint Marc, death became grimly familiar:

The Dead Carts were constantly employed, & scarcely was one empty, tho’ they held from 8 to 12 each, but another was full. Men were taken ill at dinner, who had been in the most apparent Health during the Morn;, & were carried to their long Homes at Night. In short, the putridity of the Disorder at last arose to such an h[e]ight that hundreds, almost, were absolutely drowned in their own Blood, bursting from them at every Pore. Some died raving Mad, others forming Plans for attacking, the others desponding; in fact, Death presented itself under every form an unlimited Imagination could invent. To sum up this Picture of Horror, by a Return made from the 3th [sic] to the 13th, our Regiment alone had lost eight Officers, three Quartermasters, thirteen Serjeants and Corporals, and one hundred & fifty Hussards.

The York Hussars numbered 693 men at the beginning of that return, 465 by its bleak finish in July 1796. After another year in St. Domingo only 234 Hussars would be alive. Some fell honorably in the field. But like too many of their brothers in arms, many died miserably from disease. Edmund Burke’s mordant quip rang true: “it was not an enemy we had to vanquish but a cemetery to conquer.” Yellow fever struck a big blow, but strangely, on behalf of freedom.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that disease beat the British out of St. Domingo. There were other strong reasons to leave. If the British were bleeding men, they were hemorrhaging money. The first eight months of the occupation drained £120,000 pounds from Pitt’s coffers. Costs soared
after that. French planters did their best to profit from the presence of their saviors. British hopes of handing them the bill faded fast. They dodged taxes and pocketed the price of outfitting colonial militias. Many of the municipal officials charged with collecting poll and slave taxes did the same. The local economy was a wreck. Exports were scarce, and duties negligible. By 1795 it was becoming clear that planters in St. Domingo might capitulate to British rule, but they weren’t about to pay for it.

They were not alone in making colonial adventurism expensive. The occupiers bore responsibility too. Most of the blame fell on Sir Adam Williamson, the governor of St. Domingo from October 1794 to March 1796. He was a generous man with a penchant for fine living. Every war has its refugees. This one drove them into occupied cities in large numbers. Williamson treated them with exorbitant kindness, adding cash to their free rations.24 His delight in good company inspired frequent visits from many guests: five, ten, sometimes twenty at a time for an evening of wine and banter. He lavished similar luxuries on his troops, quartering them in style whenever possible. He created new corps at the drop of a captain’s hat. Costs for officer pay, costume, and equipment spiked. In the words of David Patrick Geggus, “Williamson was incapable of saying no to anyone.”25 Nor was he alone guilty of such magnanimity. The agent-general for St. Domingo took a whopping 5 percent commission on all expenditures. It made him a rich man, earning him £86,000 in just two and a half years. When Williamson was replaced in 1796 it was reported in the House of Commons that the costs of occupation had reached £4,300,000. It fell to his successors to reduce expenditures to a mere £25,000 per month.26 That never happened. St. Domingo continued to suck money from the British treasury: £5,765,000 all told, not including military pay to rank and file.27 By 1798 evacuation was beginning to make as much economic as military sense.

The redcoats were faring badly. Pitt and Dundas tried desperately to salvage the occupation during 1795–96 with the largest naval expedition hitherto mounted—a projected 30,000 men and an astonishing 100,000 tons of shipping—but bad winds scattered the flotilla and forced a scale-back in the operation.28 Even had the expedition landed in St. Domingo, however, its success remains doubtful. Over the course of the occupation a storm of another kind had been gathering. Blacks were honing their military skills in armies of the French Republic or the Spanish king. Mulattoes were doing the same, sometimes forming armies of their own. British troops provided opportunity for those tenacious soldiers to prove their mettle and improve their tactics. Scattered attacks all across St. Domingo—in Mole St. Nicholas, Saint Marc, Léogane, Tiburon—turned the formerly enslaved into freedom fighters. It is
one of history’s happier ironies that an occupier come to preserve slavery advanced its undoing.

Armies of free blacks, not disease or expense, drove the British from St. Domingo. In this the name of Toussaint Louverture serves as a memorial, symbolizing thousands inspired by freedom to take up arms against slavery. “I am Toussaint Louverture. My name is perhaps known to you. I have undertaken vengeance. I want Liberty and Equality to reign in Saint-Domingue. I work to bring them into existence. Unite yourselves to us, brothers, and fight with us for the same cause.”29 Toussaint made this declaration on the very day Sonthonax proclaimed slavery abolished in August 1793 and just a month before the British landed. It does not simply announce the emergence of a great leader. It testifies to the readiness of a multitude of men and women—from different plantations and for diverse ends—to fight for freedom. An early measure of their success was the expulsion of one eighteenth-century superpower—Great Britain—from the colony it came to master. Another—France—would follow after five more years and some desperate fighting. The British were equal neither to Toussaint nor the multitude that, in a variety of ways, heeded his call to arms. Buckley’s observation remains astute: “The British army’s ventures into the once rich heartland of the ravaged colony, against an alert, tough, and at times elusive foe, were little more than puny and indecisive operations which were destined to fail.”30 Such are the wages of mastery. The British came to enslave. They left beaten by the free.

Marcus Rainsford had the strange fortune to witness and play a small part in these events. He mustered black troops in St. Domingo and came to admire their prowess. He later met Toussaint and experienced his magnanimity firsthand. Behind An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti hangs the tattered backdrop of the British occupation. At first Rainsford himself preferred not to notice it. In an earlier pamphlet on St. Domingo, he writes, “Enough has been professionally told of this disastrous enterprize by those so much more adequate to the task than myself, that I shall presume to add nothing more on the subject.”31 Three years later, however, he unfurled a full history of the Haitian Revolution—including the occupation—from the vantage of a career soldier who witnesses not just the weakness of the power he serves but the strength of its inspired adversaries. This white captain learns to respect the black troops on both sides of the revolutionary struggle. His initial dismissal of the British occupation registers its importance in the annals of embarrassed imperialism. St. Domingo was for a time in the 1790s the desideratum of three colonial powers. That none came to possess the colony proves the indomitable force of the free blacks who would after thirteen years of struggle declare Haiti an independent state on January 1, 1804. Their vic-
tory, the great legacy of the Haitian Revolution, makes Rainsford’s history a complex contemporary commentary on the high cost of colonial slavery.

An Officer’s Life

Marcus Rainsford, son of Edward Rainsford, was born in 1758 in County Kildare, Ireland. The Rainsford family had moved from England to Ireland in the seventeenth century, rising socially when Oliver Cromwell rewarded William Rainsford handsomely for his political allegiance by granting him considerable tracts of land. The family’s fortunes did not end with Cromwell: William’s son, Sir Mark Rainsford, was made High Sheriff of Dublin in 1690 and Lord Mayor of Dublin in 1700. Among the Rainsford properties was a brewery at St James’s Gate in the Irish capital. Its lackluster success led the Rainsfords to lease it in 1759 to a young brewer named Arthur Guinness—at £45 per annum for 9,000 years. The Guinness brewery sits today at the corner of St James’s Gate and Rainsford Street.

Marcus was the third of three children, preceded by his sister Frances and his brother Edward. He attended Trinity University in Dublin, receiving a master’s degree in 1773. The following year, Frances married an officer in the British army, Welbore Ellis Doyle. Edward grew up to be a Dublin barrister who, in his brother’s phrase, came to “enjoy the liberal fortune of our ancestors.” This comment was more than slightly sardonic. As second son, Marcus expected the smaller share of his father’s inheritance, but Edward Jr. apparently kept for himself everything bequeathed his siblings. Doyle would prove a better brother to Rainsford than Edward, always ready if need be with a place to stay or a few pounds. In the late 1770s, Rainsford followed him to fight against the North American colonies in the American War for Independence.

When Rainsford arrived, his brother-in-law had been serving for several years as an officer in the Fifty-fifth Regiment of Foot, bringing Frances with him to the colonies. Irishmen were heavily represented on both sides of the battlefield, and the British commander in chief, General Henry Clinton, soon thought of creating a regiment out of Irish deserters from American units. He put Francis Hastings, Lord Rawdon, in charge of forming the Volunteers of Ireland in New York and Philadelphia in the winter of 1778. Rawdon was a young Anglo-Irish aristocrat whose courage in battle propelled him swiftly up the military hierarchy. As the colonel of this regiment he chose exclusively officers born in Ireland, appointing Welbore Ellis Doyle as lieutenant-colonel. Marcus Rainsford likely purchased his commission as ensign in the regiment.
in 1778, although his name first appears on a muster in 1779.37 His brother-in-law probably recommended him, a pattern that would become recurrent.

Rainsford was present at the siege of Charleston in April 1780. He also participated in the battle of Camden in August 1780 before joining Lord Charles Montagu’s Duke of Cumberland’s Regiment, a unit raised in the American colonies but authorized by Governor Dalling of Jamaica for eventual service there. In November 1780 Montagu began forming his regiment—also known as the South Carolina Rangers—mostly from rebel prisoners taken at Charleston and Camden, but also from enslaved Africans. Blacks in the army hitherto performed mostly menial work because the British remained reluctant to arm them. Now they were needed to defend cities, and were promised freedom for their service. Black soldiers were engaged in several of the actions in which Rainsford was involved. By the end of the war they were a small but permanent part of his regiment.38

The South Carolina Rangers were transferred to Jamaica in August 1781, and Rainsford was promoted to captain there the following year.39 His company was based at Fort Augusta near Kingston from December 1782 to August 1783, at which point the regiment was disbanded, and he was released from duty on half-pay.40 Many white officers from colonial corps sent to Jamaica at the end of the American War of Independence settled on the island. Nothing indicates that Rainsford was among them. Black loyalist troops transferred to the island were not free to settle, however. Jamaican planters were wary of the example free black soldiers might set for the enslaved. Black soldiers from the South Carolina Rangers would later form the backbone of the First West India Regiment, mustered to defend Jamaica against the contagion of rebellion in St. Domingo.41

Rainsford returned to England, where his whereabouts grow murky. The year 1791 was an eventful one. The *Morning Chronicle* notes his appearance in Portsmouth at a fashionable dinner for fellow officers in January. Other newspapers from the same year report a feud provoking Rainsford’s indictment on charges of offering a challenge.42 Soon thereafter he made his way to London, possibly for trial. There he took steps to achieve what must have been a longtime dream: celebrity as a poet. He published—anonymously but with a distinguished press—the first canto of an epic, *The Revolution; Or, Britain Delivered*. Written in heroic couplets, the poem when finished (as its table of contents promised) would comprise twelve cantos on the potent historical subject of the Glorious Revolution.43 As a bid for literary distinction, however, *The Revolution* proved disappointing. Reviewers universally ignored it.

Rainsford’s active military service would resume as the shock of revolution in France and St. Domingo rattled British shores. The Duke of Cumberland’s
Regiment had been disbanded nearly a decade, and Rainsford was eager to obtain a new commission. Although his sister and brother-in-law appear to have supported him financially during this period, he felt the pinch of his circumstances, having had the ill luck at one point to fall afoul of highway robbers. Sometime in 1793 he wrote a letter to Prime Minister Pitt begging him in the name of “Officers on half pay of his Majesty [sic] American Forces” for “any engagement his Majesty is pleased to allow.” It is unclear whether Pitt replied, but Rainsford soon got his wish. As usual his military fortunes followed his brother-in-law’s.

Rainsford participated in the Duke of York’s ill-fated expedition against France in the Netherlands in 1794. He was assigned to Colonel Thomas Hardy’s Royal York Fusiliers, a corps made of German mercenaries commanded by British officers. His brother-in-law was again involved in the expedition. Doyle managed to find glory in an otherwise disastrous campaign, winning battles in its early stages and later with the Earl of Moira’s expeditionary force. Rainsford’s corps was raised in Germany, and it did not arrive in the Netherlands until late in the year, when the bitter winter was approaching that would bring the expedition to a horrific close. Rainsford’s military feats there hardly bear comparison to his brother-in-law’s, but he took heroic care of his men, risking his life to see them decently clothed in the deadly cold and securing safe haven for his sick and wounded during the ensuing retreat in January 1795.

Doyle’s heroics brought him more than fame. When he returned to England in February 1795 he was made brigadier-general and governor of Southampton. Rainsford followed him to England, freed from his commission in the York Fusiliers through Doyle’s rising influence. He probably stayed with his sister and Doyle while awaiting reassignment, sending a memorial to the Duke of York, perhaps in thanks for a new commission. Indeed, through his “inestimable brother-in-law,” Rainsford was appointed captain and recruiter in one of the newly minted West India regiments in July 1795. His experience in America and Jamaica doubtless also played a part in convincing military authorities of his value as a recruiter for a corps to be raised from among the enslaved in the West Indies.

A year earlier, General John Vaughan first floated the idea for such a corps as a way to offset the terrible toll that guerilla warfare, climate, and sickness were already taking on British troops. Recruiters were initially instructed to muster soldiers primarily in St. Domingo, but a lack of enthusiasm among free blacks for the British cause led authorities to authorize requisitioning slaves in Jamaica as well. Rainsford landed there at Port Royal early in 1796 destined for St. Domingo. A sudden armed uprising by the Trelawney Ma-
roons caused Lord Balcarres, then governor of Jamaica, to order many of the troops passing through to stay and fight what became known as the Second Maroon War. Rainsford participated in the conflict in some fashion. He certainly observed it. The British deployment of bloodhounds against the Maroons made a vivid and lasting impression, which he later recorded in his *Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti*. The war was over by March 1796, thanks in no small part to the bloodhounds, but Lord Balcarres was still reluctant to allow British troops to proceed to their original destinations.

The exact date of Rainsford’s arrival in St. Domingo remains unclear, as are the particulars of his movements, but he was probably on the island by mid-1796. Recruiting was a difficult assignment, and it allowed unusual mobility. Muster rolls for the Third West India Regiment list Rainsford “absent by leave” from its inception and throughout his time in St. Domingo. Black volunteers there were scarce. Even planters supporting the British occupation hesitated to turn their slaves into soldiers. The British quickly imposed a mandatory levy in the occupied zone of one in fifteen enslaved Africans. They would in time resort to buying blacks from Jamaican planters—and from Africa on the sly. Despite Rainsford’s efforts, the Third West India Regiment never fully materialized in St. Domingo. It remained mostly a corps of officers, some of whom were garrisoned at Stony Hill in St. Andrews Parish, Jamaica, in 1796. The regiment was eventually ordered to Martinique, where its commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Keppel, had been appointed civil and military governor.

Rainsford returned to England early in 1797, apparently to recover from an injury to his left arm. His name appears on the musters of *HMS Sampson*, which docked at Plymouth on January 8. By February he was in London seeking payment from the War Office for his stint in the West Indies. In a written reply the undersecretary M. Lewis rejected Rainsford’s request for “Bat and Forage money stated to be due [. . .] for service in the island of Jamaica” on the grounds that such pay could only be issued by a regimental agent in the field. Strapped for cash as usual Rainsford could no longer rely on the generosity of his brother-in-law. In April 1796 Doyle had sailed to Ceylon to take up the duties of commander in chief and acting governor. The Duke of York’s crackdown on nonchalant behavior among British officers provided yet another incentive for Rainsford to return to the field. Sometime in mid-1797 he again sailed for the West Indies, that soldier’s cemetery, to rejoin his regiment and collect his pay.

His first challenge was to find his unit. During his absence, the Third West India Regiment had been transferred out of St. Domingo, but it wasn’t clear where. Martinique seemed the likely destination, since Lieutenant-Colonel
Keppel, the unit’s commanding officer, was now military governor there. But when Rainsford arrived, the governor informed him that, no, the regiment was in Jamaica. Rainsford boarded a transport and made his way to Port Royal, only to find that his unit had already left Jamaica—for Martinique. He had no alternative but to return windward. It was well past time to rejoin his regiment. The good soldier would do his duty, or so Rainsford claims in his writings. Musters of the Third West India Regiment contain traces of a more complicated story, however. They list him “absent by leave” until July 1798, when he finally reappears in Martinique. Rainsford would not catch up with the Third West India Regiment for over a year after he had set out to find it.

In the meantime he had adventures. Making his way from Jamaica to Martinique, he boarded the *Hannibal* on October 8, 1797, at the invitation of his friend Admiral Edward Tyrell Smith and sailed to occupied St. Domingo. On October 24 he disembarked at Mole St. Nicholas. Exactly how long Rainsford stayed on the island remains a mystery. On December 8 he at last secured his pay, receiving £45.15.0 for services rendered from August 25 to December 24, 1797. Tempting as it might have been to remain in a war zone, he was wanted in Martinique. Early in 1798 Rainsford arranged passage on the schooner *Maria*, flying a Danish flag but piloted by a British captain named James Frazer. The ship had the bad luck to run into a hurricane and was forced ashore at Cape François, the Republican capital of the colony—enemy territory, since the British would not evacuate until autumn. As several French vessels sailed to intercept the *Maria*, Rainsford made a snap decision. He would pretend to be an American to avoid arrest and detention as a prisoner of war.

The trick worked. Rainsford passed as an American sailor and on landing encountered a lively if war-weary town. Trade with American merchants remained brisk (hence the disguise). Cape François still had fine hotels and an active theater, which Rainsford found time to attend. He seems to have enjoyed the high life, such as it was, and it wasn’t long before he met the famed general in chief of the Republican Army, Toussaint Louverture. Rainsford conversed with him on several occasions and even tested his skill at billiards. Always the soldier, Rainsford made the military most of his unintended stay among the enemy. He drew sketches of the town and its surrounding fortifications, intending to present them to the Duke of York. His observations of black troops confirmed what he and the British army had learned from experience. Their skill at guerrilla warfare was impressive. Their military discipline was, too. They could march and maneuver with the best, as Rainsford noted when he witnessed a review of several thousand troops.

But Captain Rainsford had a regiment to find, so after repairs the schooner
embarked again for Martinique. Only forty miles down the coast, however, the boat sprung a leak, or so Frazer and Rainsford told local authorities when they landed at the heavily defended port of Fort Liberté. This time Rainsford fooled no one. A sentry immediately arrested him under suspicion of being a British spy. Luckily he was detained on board the Maria long enough for him to toss the bag containing his notes, sketches, and military papers overboard. His captors soon transferred him to a jail on shore to await trial. A dashing Republican officer named Moïse, Toussaint’s adopted nephew, commanded Fort Liberté. He served as a member of the military tribunal hearing Rainsford’s case, over which General Henry Christophe presided. It was a who’s who of revolutionary leaders, and they were in no mood for mercy. Frazer’s protests were to no avail: Rainsford was judged a spy, condemned to death, and returned to prison to await Toussaint’s endorsement of the verdict.

Rainsford remained there for two weeks before Toussaint’s answer finally came. To Rainsford’s surprise and lasting gratitude, the general ordered his immediate release and departure. Toussaint informed the British officer that he should never return to the island without proper identification, a mischievous quip that convinced Rainsford the general in chief had no more been fooled by the American disguise than had his tribunal. Rainsford left St. Domingo grateful to be alive. The Maria suffered no further misadventure and eventually reached Martinique safely. The commander there, General Cornelius Cuyler, welcomed the truant recruiter back to his regiment and authorized compensation for the abandoned bag containing his sketches and papers. But Rainsford did not stay long in Martinique. The promise of compensation drew him to London, superseding, apparently, the demands of his commission.

Rainsford settled for a few months at 27 James Street near Covent Garden and as usual chased his pay. He repeatedly wrote the War Office, only to get the same rejections he received a year earlier from the same M. Lewis. Rainsford may have tried to sell his West Indian commission or exchange it for one in a better climate. But once again, he was forced to return to the West Indies, if only to collect his salary. He arrived in Martinique once and for all on April 18, 1799, serving dutifully until March 19, 1800, when he retired, “ordered by his Excellency the Commander in Chief [General Thomas Trigg] to do no more duty for the Regiment but to receive pay for the present.” Rainsford must have sailed with the first available transport to England, for he sold his commission on June 17, 1800. His military life was over, at least for the moment.

He still harbored his old dream, however, of achieving distinction as a man of letters. In June 1800 R. B. Scott published a new six-canto edition of Rains-
ford’s 1791 epic. This time the poem found an audience, albeit few and not so fit. It received very harsh notice in several literary journals. This reaction may have dampened Rainsford’s poetic ambitions, but not (according to the press) his social life. Rainsford regaled London high society with tales of his adventures in St. Domingo, finding an audience for another kind of writing. Although his poetry never caught on, his military memoirs would. In 1802 Scott published Rainsford’s first pamphlet, *A Memoir of Transactions That Took Place in St. Domingo in the Spring of 1799*. The public was hungry for news about revolution in the French colony. In the wake of the British evacuation, information was sketchy. Newspapers spread the notoriety of Toussaint Louverture as the British government sought to drive a wedge between him and the French Republic in order to secure favorable commercial relations in the event of independence in St. Domingo. At the same time fear of an independent black state there was growing among British planters in Jamaica, their political allies at home, and increasingly the general public. These issues gained currency as peace with France gained plausibility. The pacific interlude that opened with the Treaty of Amiens (March 1802) saw the publication of several pamphlets debating the fate of St. Domingo. As Napoleon organized an invasion force and as Britain discreetly observed neutrality, commentators including Rainsford deliberated the outcome.

The military apologist Colonel Charles Chalmers judged the occupation to have been “a most important and splendid enterprise,” whose disappointing outcome was an effect, not of black military prowess, but of white administrative incompetence—and yellow fever. James Stephen offered more caustic commentary. With abolitionist intensity, he denounced England’s “cart-whip empire” and dismissed the occupation as “a long blockade.” Stephen perceived French intentions with baleful clarity: “a counter-revolution in the state of the enfranchised negroes, is the main object of France in her West India expedition.” Would England stand by and watch as Napoleon, in the name of the Republic, re-impose slavery on people freed in the name of the Republic?

Rainsford’s first published accounts of his experience in St. Domingo participate in this debate. He wrote his 1802 *Memoir of Transactions That Took Place in St. Domingo*, as its opening pages claim, both to deny that Toussaint was untrustworthy and to prove that an independent black state in St. Domingo posed no threat to British West Indian possessions. These were provocative and original arguments, at odds with prevailing prejudices. The pamphlet attracted some critical attention in England, and was reviewed, lauded, and excerpted in foreign journals. Rainsford’s eyewitness insights were appreciated abroad, among other reasons, for providing a counterpoint to French reports. Reception was favorable enough for Scott to publish a sec-
ond edition of the memoir later in 1802 under the title St. Domingo; Or, an Historical, Political and Military Sketch of the Black Republic.\textsuperscript{85} This edition was thirty pages longer than the first and included a new section devoted to the island’s geographical and historical background, as well as a freshly engraved map. Scott published yet a third edition near the end of the year, this one containing one of the earliest extant portraits of Toussaint.\textsuperscript{86} British readers responded positively to a firsthand account revolution in St. Domingo.

Napoleon’s invasion force, 25,000 strong, landed at Cape François in February 1802. Military momentum soon swung against the revolutionaries. Under the command of Napoleon’s brother-in-law, Charles Leclerc, the French achieved quick victories, defeating some black troops outright and absorbing others with their leaders into the French Army. Toussaint resisted magnificently but, with the arrival of 5,500 seasoned French veterans, he saw victory slipping away. Reluctantly, he negotiated surrender. His troops became soldiers of France, while he retired from the field of battle to private life on his plantation at Ennery. News of Toussaint’s surrender reached Britain later in 1802, yet Rainsford remained steadfast in his favorable opinion of the black revolutionaries: “French policy has been successfully exerted, but St. Domingo is not subdued.”\textsuperscript{87} The horror and hard victory still to come on the island would prove Rainsford right. In the meantime he enjoyed a small celebrity, hoisting cups with his former comrades and commanders of the campaigns in America and the Netherlands, all of whom had risen up the military ranks. Prominent among them was the Earl of Moira, whose nuptials in 1804 provided Rainsford with another opportunity to test his muse. He was not as close to Moira as had been his brother-in-law Doyle, but he nevertheless wrote a wedding poem in his honor: An Hymeneal on the Marriage of the Right Hon. Francis, Earl of Moira.\textsuperscript{88} His sonnet on the death of Erasmus Darwin had appeared earlier in the Gentleman's Magazine.\textsuperscript{89} The old soldier was having some success with his new vocation.

St. Domingo was more than ever in the news. The devious capture and arrest of Toussaint, spirited to France to languish and die in prison at Fort de Joux, did little to assuage British wartime prejudices. Accounts of atrocities on both sides circulated widely. With the renewal of hostilities in May 1803 Britain established a naval blockade around St. Domingo. Better an independent black state than a recovered French colony. Black revolutionaries rallied around Toussaint’s successor, General Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who fought tenaciously and achieved final victory in November 1803 at the Battle of Vertières near Cape François. Dessalines’s army drove the French from the island for good, inflicting heavy damage on their colonial empire and shaping the course of world history.\textsuperscript{90} Napoleon had met his match. Dessalines pro-
claimed an independent Haiti on January 1, 1804, and himself emperor the following September.

Rainsford's predictions were vindicated. The astonishing rise of this black empire convinced Rainsford that readers would welcome a longer, fully documented version of his historical account. He further researched the natural and political history of the island. He read all available documents, then sought out more.91 A lavish, comprehensive, and expensive book appeared a year later in 1805, and it made a splash. It was widely reviewed in England and on the continent and was translated twice within the year.92 The ultimate impact of An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti may be debatable, but its immediate impact is not. It attracted wide interest and reigned for a time as the standard British account of Haitian independence. Rainsford, who had failed as a poet, flourished as a historian.

Even so, his later years saw accomplishment mixed with obscurity. However successful, the publication of his book did not solve Rainsford's money problems. In May 1810 he enlisted as an ensign with the First Royal Veteran Battalion, a unit made up of wounded, infirm, and aging soldiers fit mostly for garrison duties. He served until it was disbanded four years later. In December 1811 Rainsford began to receive a military pension of £100 a year for “injury sustained while a prisoner of war” in St. Domingo.93 Steady income seems not to have brought him the financial security he perennially chased. His fortunes took a hard turn when in 1813 he was again imprisoned, this time for debt. According to a notice in the London Gazette, he owed money to a crowd of creditors: army outfitters, winesellers, tailors, bankers, coal merchants, all the muses of a desperate affluence. He was living beyond his means.94

The old soldier was not quite done with the limelight, however, nor was he done with the West Indies. With Dessalines’s assassination in 1806 Haiti split into separate states in the north and south. The rise to power of General Henry Christophe in the north boded well for diplomatic and commercial relations between Great Britain and Haiti. A native English speaker born in St. Kitts, Christophe held the British in high regard. After being proclaimed king in 1811, he viewed the United Kingdom as a political, economic, and cultural ally. King Henry I of Haiti, as he was known, favored British fashion and British governance, partly as a matter of survival.95 The Treaty of Paris of 1814 allowed France to resume the slave trade and effectively recognized its title to St. Domingo. The restored French monarch, Louis XVIII, plotted to reconquer Haiti.96 Both King Henry and President Alexandre Pétion of the southern republic prepared for a French invasion. The French threat was suddenly once again palpable.
Henry’s foreign minister, Count Limonade, and his secretary to the king, Baron de Vastey, wrote pamphlet after pamphlet denouncing France’s plans, distributing them throughout Europe to awaken sympathy for Haiti’s cause.\footnote{97} King Henry himself corresponded directly with the famed abolitionists Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, who in turn organized demonstrations against French slavery in England. Britons reacted strongly to this shameful aspect of the Treaty of Paris. Meetings occurred in pubs and taverns calling for universal abolition of the slave trade. Rainsford himself attended at least one event that was noted all the way across the Atlantic in Haiti. On November 24, 1814, the *Times of London* published a letter sent by Count Limonade to Marcus Rainsford thanking him on King Henry’s behalf for a stirring speech delivered at a public meeting at the Horns tavern, Kennington, a few months earlier.\footnote{98} Rainsford’s staunch support for a free Haiti impressed the Haitian court.\footnote{99}

That support appears also to have inspired Haitian gratitude. If the evidence can be trusted, Rainsford was subsequently appointed lieutenant general in the Haitian army. It was obviously an honorary appointment, and its duties (if there were any) remain a mystery. Perhaps he acted in a diplomatic capacity. But according to the *Morning Chronicle* of February 25, 1815, he attended one of the prince regent’s levees as an officer of the Haitian army, for he presented the Duke of York with “A Plan of Defence of the kingdom of Hayti.”\footnote{100} Whether officially or not, Rainsford served the cause of an independent Haiti until the end. In June 1816 he translated and published several texts by Baron de Vastey under the title *Translation of an Official Communication from the Government of Hayti*, which he signed “Lieutenant-General Sir Marcus Rainsford, of the Haytean Army.”\footnote{101} These texts served as a salvo in the war of words waged by the publicists of King Henry and President Pétion. Rainsford, as any lieutenant general would have, stood with his commander and the northern kingdom.

In spite of this apparently crowning appointment, Rainsford never returned to the island that had so intimately touched his life. He died in London and was buried on November 4, 1817, in the parish of St Giles in the Fields, survived by no one, his books achieving only an ambiguous immortality.\footnote{102} Even after death his fate remained tied to the black empire whose rise from slavery he was the first to chronicle fully in English. In his will he mentions “money [. . .] due to me in Saint Domingo in the West Indies or coming therefrom,” which he bequeathed to a woman named Ellen Houghton, “in consideration of her faithful attendance on me for the last Eleven years.”\footnote{103} What her relationship was to Rainsford remains a mystery, as does so much else about this career soldier, sometime author, and permanent friend of Haiti.
Rainsford’s Writings

Such was the life of Marcus Rainsford reconstructed from documentary evidence. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that his own account should differ in a few minor but decisive details. Chief among them is the date he gives for his adventures in St. Domingo, emblazoned in the title of his earliest pamphlet: *A Memoir of Transactions That Took Place in St. Domingo in 1799*. That date is incorrect. Rainsford landed at Mole St. Nicholas on October 24, 1797, as the musters of *HMS Hannibal* attest. He received payment there in December as captain of the Third West India Regiment, and he remained in St. Domingo for part of the following year. But by November 1798 he was back in London, writing letters to the War Office appealing for pay and compensation. Why this discrepancy? Maybe Rainsford simply got the date wrong—in edition after edition of his historical memoir. The more likely answer is less flattering: he willfully misrepresented the facts. Shifting that date forward one year, from 1798 to 1799, puts Rainsford in St. Domingo *after* the British evacuation. That little adjustment extenuates the question of what exactly a British officer was doing so far behind enemy lines. Beyond his frequent and emphatic denials, no hard evidence exists that Rainsford was in fact a spy. His lost sketches of enemy fortifications and troop deployments attest to little more than the fact gathering of any blue-blooded officer of His Majesty’s army.

The motivation for Rainsford’s time-slip is cultural rather than military: by transporting his adventures ahead one year, he directs attention away from the disaster of the British occupation and toward the glory of the Haitian Revolution. Rainsford’s historical writing serves a double ideological agenda. As it chronicles the inspiring victory of black freedom fighters in their battle against re-enslavement by the French, it also downplays Britain’s recent attempt to defend slavery by military means. Although he devotes forty pages to the British occupation in his history, that “disastrous enterprize” gets subsumed by his personal adventures, which quite conveniently occur a year after the evacuation of 1798. However quietly, Rainsford participates in a cultural cover-up that subordinates the impetus of revolution—chattel slavery—to happier outcomes, in this case a commuted death sentence and an independent Haiti. The problem of Britain’s larger role in thirteen years of slaughter in St. Domingo remains understated.

This is artful dodging, certainly. At least one early reviewer had trouble completely accepting the authenticity of Rainsford’s history, although he pointed out only a few factual errors. The rhetorical cunning of *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* is not only the effect of a few factual liberties, however. Rainsford was a literary author, or wanted to be one.
His historical account of the Haitian Revolution aims for epic scope, as the book’s opening lines attest: “It has frequently been the fate of striking events, and particularly those which have altered the condition of mankind, to be denied that consideration by their contemporaries, which they obtain from the veneration of posterity.”

This rousing overture turns out to be a barely modified version of the first sentence of the dedication to *The Revolution: Or, Britain Delivered*: “It has been the distinguishing fate of these great events, which have changed the state of a Government, to receive always but part of the praise to which they are entitled.”

Rainsford finds his true epic subject in St. Domingo: an unsung martial contest, complete with warring nations, fallen heroes, and victory against incalculable odds. He sings the birth of a new nation from the womb of slavery. What to many seemed a historical fluke—successful slave rebellion—becomes in his hands a heroic revolution. The peculiar form of *An HistoricalAccount of the Black Empire of Hayti* (part history, part personal narrative, part news roundup) obfuscates its indebtedness to Rainsford’s poetic writings. But the ambition to compose an epic drives Rainsford’s work from the start. If Rainsford did not openly court the epic muse, Calliope, until 1791, they had met before. Having attended Trinity College, Rainsford, like most students at the time, would have dabbled in composing poetry. He certainly studied it extensively, along with history, Greek, and Latin. Throughout his career as an officer in His Majesty’s army, Rainsford would keep poetry close to his heart.

In 1782 the poet and critic William Hayley published *An Essay on Epic Poetry*, a spirited call for the revival of epic form in Britain. John Milton, a master of the form in English, who had written the definitive Christian epic a century earlier, commanded Hayley’s respect. Yet Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, with its Heavenly Muse and diabolical rebellion, its pallid Adam and greedy Eve, too clearly showed the touch of religious faction to suit the liberal nation Britain had since become. Hayley urged poets to return to a more classical epic form, one celebratory of the nation, its martial history and moral prowess: “I wish to kindle in our Poets a warmer sense of national honour, with ambition to excel in the noblest province of poesy.” Not Heaven and Hell but Britain and her native-born heroes provide the true stuff of epic: “Th’ Heroic Muse, in earthly virtue strong / May drive the host of Angels from her Song.” This new, secular epic, faithful to classical progenitors, might resuscitate the reputation of England as much as its poetry:

That Poesy’s sublime, neglected field
May still new laurels to Ambition yield;
Her Epic trumpet, in a modern hand,
Still make the spirit glow, the heart expand:
Be such our doctrine! Our enlivening aim
The Muse’s honor, and our Country’s fame!\textsuperscript{110}

Hayley’s new epic would be historical and human, alive with “scenes that glitter with no heavenly blaze, / Where human agents human feelings raise.”\textsuperscript{111} And these human agents would be British. Every nation has its heroes. Why should England’s go unnoticed? “By some strange fate, which rul’d each Poet’s tongue, / Her dearest Worthies yet remain unsung.”\textsuperscript{112} The solution was an epic grounded in British history and devoted to British virtue:

To sing, with equal fire, of nobler themes,
To gild Historic Truth with Fancy’s beams!
To Patriot Chiefs unsung thy Lyre devote,
And swell to Liberty the lofty note!\textsuperscript{113}

Hayley challenges the next great English poet to produce a poem worthy of the English nation, a celebration of “Patriot Chiefs unsung.”

English poets heeded Hayley’s call for a “new national epic,” Rainsford among them.\textsuperscript{114} In his introduction to the first edition of \textit{The Revolution: Or, Britain Delivered}, Rainsford restates Hayley’s lament, noting how decisive historical events “receive but part of the praise to which they are entitled.”\textsuperscript{115} With this assertion, Rainsford makes clear that his narrative will not be merely historical: indeed, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 was already a topic for “serious” histories.\textsuperscript{116} But neither would it be merely poetic. He intended to produce a new, hybrid form, an epic poem that could stand as history; inspiration supported by incontrovertible evidence:

By the subsequent view, it will appear that the Author does not mean a simple panegyric on the Revolution, a work of imagination only. He wishes to aim at something higher; the connection of History and Poetry; and, though obliged, from the recent date of the facts, (which do not admit such embellishment), to exclude from the former every aid of the marvellous, (a license allowable with a remote period), he is persuaded that the interesting nature of the subject itself will sufficiently compensate for this defect [. . .]. Hence it may be considered, perhaps, as a work \textit{sui generis}, that aims, like the Epic Poem, at celebrating a great event, but, from the nature of its subject, is more strictly confined to truth in its detail; while, depending on the greatness of the subject itself for its resources, it applies less to the imagination than to the head and heart.\textsuperscript{117}

A year earlier James Ogden had made a similar claim of historical worth for his epic poem \textit{The Revolution}.\textsuperscript{118} Where Ogden was content with a “foundation in historical facts,” however, Rainsford painstakingly introduced into the first edition of his poem modes of documentation borrowed from historical
writing. Almost every page is laden with footnotes providing short biographical sketches for major characters or explanations of historical events. *The Revolution; Or, England Delivered* is an odd text, reading like an annotated edition of itself. Mixing poetry and history may not have been unprecedented, but Rainsford felt it was necessary to give the Glorious Revolution its due.

*The Revolution* landed with a thud, provoking no critical response in 1791. That only one of the first volume’s promised seven cantos was published suggests it was no crowd pleaser. But Rainsford soldiered on. R. B. Scott published his considerably revised six canto edition of *The Revolution* in 1800. The poem’s dedication, barely modified, now lauds the king. Its pages still carry footnotes, but they are fewer in number and shorter in length. Rainsford similarly streamlines his original preface, paring down his disquisition on historical writing. He again defends his originality, asserting that “however the present work in the eye of criticism may appear to be executed, this merit it can at least boldly claim, that the Principles of the Revolution are held out by it, in a point of view the most engaging that has yet been offered.”

Critics did not think so. Rainsford’s poem was savaged in several journals. The *Monthly Review* pilloried its “rugged” versification and its “remarkably incorrect” rhymes.” Rainsford may have hoped he would be recognized for inventing an original epic form, but critics ignored that aspect of the poem, preferring to attack its style. The *Critical Review* noted that “the author may be intimately acquainted with the history of the times of which he treats, but, decidedly, he is no poet”—rough judgment for anyone responsible for two hundred and fifty pages of verse. The *Monthly Review*, however, concluded that “a perusal of this work affords more entertainment than many other compositions of the same kind, which possess superior poetical merit.” To read beyond the bad poetry (Rainsford’s clunking heroic couplets) is to discover an epic of exactly the kind Hayley calls for; however, one that describes recent historical events and celebrates superior national virtues. Admittedly, the Tonnage and Poundage Act and the Exclusion Bill lack the thrill of Troy’s windy plains (not to mention Heaven’s starry spheres), but Rainsford’s turn to the Glorious Revolution for the stuff of epic is nevertheless bold in its way. It advances the era of epic glory from the distant to a more recent past, claiming for contemporary England a living legacy of national superiority.

Hardly a popular argument today, nor even, apparently, then. But for Rainsford, the Glorious Revolution was, historically and politically, a *revolution*. It transformed British society from autocracy into a liberal polity. Rainsford writes a Whig history in couplets that narrate the historical fall of tyranny (of both crown and faction) and the triumph of law, guarantor of freedom: “True
Freedom’s reign, on Law’s just sway depends, / Where public weal, the private int’rest blends.”124 His epic muse is “fair Freedom,” whose descent he calls upon to inspire his rhymes. His epic heroes are famous (Protestant) Britons, whose devotion to law in the face of power proves their enduring virtue: the First Earl of Bedford, who narrates the poem; his martyred son Russell; James Scott, First Duke of Monmouth; and Algernon Sydney, eventually beheaded in the cause of freedom:

Accept ye Patriot Band! Your Country’s praise,
To you did Freedom owe here spreading blaze;
’Twas your fair toil, first wak’d the nation’s zeal,
Against their Rights each inroad to repel,
That trac’d the bound where regal sway should end,
And gave to trampl’d law her just command.125

To sing the triumph of law over power and privilege may not achieve the sublime. But for Rainsford as for Hayley freedom is the true subject of the contemporary epic. National heroes consolidate a (Protestant) nation in the name of freedom: “Immortal chiefs! to whom Britannia owes / Fair Freedom’s gem that now adorns her brows!”126

Rainsford seldom acknowledged publicly his poetic ambitions. They remained mostly anonymous, something only friends, family, and acquaintances deserved to know. His attempt at historical epic, however, was instrumental in leading him to try writing history with an epic scope. In the rebellion in St. Domingo Rainsford found material for a new national epic, in its own way glorious: a revolution transforming a slave colony into an independent nation. He approached the project with premeditation, publishing two synoptic pamphlets before attempting a complete account of the revolution. An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti shares with the classical epic its encyclopedic reach and martial content. Moving from minute details of daily life among free blacks to the military exploits of their great hero Toussaint Louverture, it incorporates epic convention into the body of historical narrative. More importantly it continues the project begun in The Revolution; Or, Britain Delivered of celebrating law and liberty as the foundation of national virtue — only this time the “Patriot Band” comprises once enslaved insurgents and their “Country’s praise” exalts a newborn nation, Hayti.

Rainsford faced a peculiar historical conundrum, however, one he experienced firsthand as part of the British force of occupation. The Glorious Revolution in England led historically to counter-revolutionary intervention in St. Domingo. His sometime epic muse (“Freedom”) stood baffled by contemporary events. Enter the historian, Captain Marcus Rainsford, Esq., a career
soldier writing as a simple observer of events in St. Domingo. Chief among Rainsford’s literary achievements may be this authorial persona: Captain Rainsford, twenty-four years in His Majesty’s service, a devoted if obscure officer who witnessed revolution in the making. This Rainsford is a mere chronicler of looming historical events, history’s pawn rather than its producer. He contrasts with the anonymous author of The Revolution; Or, Britain Delivered in lacking the moral assurance that Britain is another word for liberty. His participation in the events he narrates complicates their value—for himself as much as for his readers, a point he makes in his earliest published account of St. Domingo: “Very little will be expected in the following pages when coming from the pen of a Soldier but that little will be found to be his own.”

This emphasis on personal involvement in the narrative of history allies Rainsford’s Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti with contemporary literary innovation. British Romantic writers who invoke the epic muse do so as themselves. William Wordsworth is the obvious example. The Prelude (1798–1805) implodes the classical epic, turning everyday life into material for heroic song and placing the poet at its center. Rainsford’s personal turn is less complete but similarly heuristic. Including himself in his narrative, if even provisionally, allows him to observe a new nation being born: Hayti, true heir to a British freedom that for the moment even Britain has forsaken, but that this British bard does his best to sing. It’s a neat trick, this Britishization of the Black Empire. It anticipates at the level of historical narrative the neo-colonial agenda of British foreign policy toward an independent Haiti. Rainsford’s history recapitulates his poetry’s ambition to establish national preeminence, with this difference: Haiti now wears “fair Freedom’s gem” by proxy. The Revolution; Or, St. Domingo Delivered, Rainsford’s epic history, assimilates the Haitian Revolution to its Glorious precursor, making Haiti the heir of British liberty and Britain the executor of Haitian freedom.

Rainsford reached for epic scope by cobbling together extant accounts of St. Domingo’s history. He references early records of travel in the West Indies, quotes French sources on the settlement of Hispaniola, and cites contemporary classics about St. Domingo. On the Haitian Revolution itself, Rainsford refers to and comments on a variety of French and British sources. His book shows the influence of other genres too. From travel narrative Rainsford takes an ethnographic attentiveness to his surroundings, describing mundane details of domestic and social relations among free blacks at Cape François. Romance adds a touch of sentiment to his story when a woman of color, an “angelic representation of mercy,” visits him in jail at Fort Liberté while he awaits execution. An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti mixes a
variety of popular and bellettristic genres to produce a narrative that Rainsford hoped would appeal to a wide audience.

Reviews were generally positive if not unanimously kind. The book’s composition came under particularly harsh scrutiny in the Edinburgh Review, which skewered Rainsford for leaning too heavily on the Abbé Raynal, William Robertson, and Bryan Edwards, without bothering to comment on their mistakes. It dismissed the book’s heft as demonstrating “the true way to expand a narrative of thirty or forty pages, into several pounds weight of letter-press.” Other reviews were much more favorable. Rainsford’s general description of life in St. Domingo, his portrayal of Toussaint Louverture, and his vignette about the benevolent woman of color were all excerpted at length. Rainsford’s enthusiasm for the newborn Haitian state, however, frequently met with condescension. In an otherwise generous response the Anti-Jacobin Review concluded that Rainsford “forgets himself, by making the negro see with the eyes of an European.” The Monthly Review, while noting his admiration for “the Negroe race,” confessed that its editors could not “entirely adopt his sanguine views.” The views of this simple soldier were ahead of their time.

An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti fared even better abroad than in Britain. The philosopher and editor Wilhelm Von Archenholz published extensive selections in his journal Minerva, a source for German intellectuals of information about the revolution in St. Domingo. Among them was Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, an avid student as much of current events as of contemporary philosophy. Hegel was even then refining his dialectical conception of history as the concretization of spirit. He published The Phenomenology of Spirit in 1807, the very year of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain. Given the centrality to his views of the restive relation between Master and Slave (“Herrschaft und Knchtschaft”) there is every reason to believe that the Haitian Revolution helped inspire Hegel’s dialectic. Through his influential account of black rebellion, then, Rainsford plays an oblique part in the development, of not only dialectical philosophy, but also its later, more insurgent interpretations.

He plays a direct part in creating a lasting historical awareness of the Haitian Revolution as a progressive event. Other contemporary accounts, most notably Bryan Edwards’s An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo, looked with trepidation on the prospect of an independent black state in the Caribbean. Edwards first published his history in 1797, then republished it in 1801 as the third volume of The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies. He personally witnessed the immediate aftermath of the uprising around Cape François in August 1791, and
what he saw was “the triumph of savage anarchy over all order and government.” As proof he offered a litany of atrocities. His authority was formidable, having lived most of his life in Jamaica and amassed great wealth as a planter. Edwards interpreted the rebellion in St. Domingo as a Republican contagion that menaced nearby Jamaica, and he wrote in hope that “fellow-colonists, in lamenting its catastrophe, might at the same time profit by so terrible an example.” Profit they did, as government policy veered toward securing the safety of Britain’s richest colony. Edwards viewed the occupation of St. Domingo as a noble endeavor “to restore peace, subordination, and good government on this theater of bloodshed.”

Rainsford served this military endeavor, but his history abdicates Edwards’s agenda of restoring “peace, subordination, and good government.” Instead, it accounts politically for the unprecedented phenomenon its title announces: the Black Empire of Hayti. In doing so Rainsford helps orchestrate a chorus of dissent that includes abolitionists, poets, and pamphleteers. The celebrated abolitionist Thomas Clarkson provided financial backing for armed rebellion in St. Domingo. As early as 1792 the anonymous *An Inquiry into the Causes of the Insurrection of the Negroes in the Island of St. Domingo* lays blame for the unrest squarely at the feet of French planters: “Resistance is always justifiable where force is the substitute of right.” William Blake wove the revolutionary events in St. Domingo into the mythology of his contemporaneously written long poem *Vala: Or, the Four Zoas*. Rainsford would hardly endorse the radicalism of some of these activists. His history nevertheless offers an important corrective to writers and politicians who saw only savagery in the prospect of black independence. *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* endorses the Haitian Revolution as an instance of human progress. The history of an independent Haiti, far from falling into eclipse as a potent tradition of commentary would have it, continually challenges conventional beliefs and disturbs colonialist behaviors. Haiti found in Rainsford’s historical account a source of persistent historical memory.

The Revolution, Illustrated

That memory persists most vividly through the engraved images that accompany Rainsford’s text: twelve in all, including a newly drawn map of St. Domingo and a plan of the city of Cape François. With the exception of the latter, Rainsford is credited with creating the original drawings on which the engravings are based. He clearly possessed some talent with the pencil as well as the quill. He also produced at least one political cartoon, a satire
published on May 27, 1803 (just two weeks after the collapse of the Peace of Amiens), titled “A Fraternal Embrace!” This arch image pillories Napoleon's grip on Holland and his belligerence against blacks. Rainsford added images to his pamphlets on St. Domingo, increasing their number as his publications grew longer. The stark engravings in *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* remain to this day the best known contemporary representations of the Haitian Revolution. They were executed by Inigo Barlow, an engraver working in London known for meticulous renderings of natural scenes and specimens. Barlow contributed illustrations to a variety of noteworthy books, including Abraham Rees's *Cyclopaedia* (1788–91), Thomas Maurice's *Indian Antiquities* (1800), and John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of*
a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes in Surinam (1796), a commission he shared with, among others, William Blake. The engravings Barlow made for Rainsford’s book range from the tender to the horrific and include a full-length portrait of Toussaint Louverture. Together they tell an unprecedented visual story of events in St. Domingo.

That story falls into two acts: the first illustrating Rainsford’s personal adventures and the second depicting the horrors that followed Leclerc’s invasion. This simple visual narrative personalizes Haiti’s complicated history. Both Rainsford and his reader become privileged witnesses at the birth of the black empire. Rainsford’s physical presence in the first four images establishes the ruling perspective of his visual and verbal narratives: that of a British officer in foreign territory. Both come slanted by and for British eyes, communicating not the history of Haiti so much as this particular Englishman’s historical account. Rainsford emphasizes the uniqueness of this perspective in the book’s frontispiece. Surrounded by St. Domingo’s lush vegetation and wearing his American disguise, he engages (as the caption states) “in Conversation with a Private Soldier of the Black Army.” Rainsford comes not to conquer but to converse. His regard for black revolutionaries is serious; his gaze direct and respectful. His history will follow suit: this foreign observer sees the revolution in terms favoring British interests.

The next image shows a diminutive Rainsford walking up the steps of a small temple to French liberty—curious homage for an Englishman to pay. The appearance of this temple evolves over the course of Rainsford’s publications on St. Domingo. Here it sits in a forest clearing by a brook, guarded by two disproportionately tall sentinels. Although the engraving depicts an edifice of classical symmetry, Rainsford’s text speaks of “a canopy, or dome, of which the architecture was not perfectly regular.” Prominent in the middle of the structure is an altar on which sit two tablets of stone marked with Roman numerals in imitation of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, surmounted by a liberty cap on a stake. Rainsford describes “two seats, and above them an inscription” from a speech by the French commissioners Sonthonax and Etienne Polverel, men “execrated for their conduct” yet held in an esteem “favorable to their talents and to their spirit.” With Rainsford, British readers shrink in the presence of this declaration of freedom, which far from being a “gift” from the French Republic, arose out of the exigencies of revolution.

The two images that follow narrate the episode of Rainsford’s trial and conviction as a spy. In the first the accused stands, handcuffed and flanked by guards, to the right of a table fronting the tribunal judging him. The image re-stages da Vinci’s The Last Supper, with General Henry Christophe, Toussaint’s
second in command and future ruler of the Kingdom of Haiti, in the place of honor. All eyes are on Rainsford as Christophe delivers the verdict. Still in disguise, this white officer receives a death sentence from a black military tribunal. Nothing in the image suggests a miscarriage of justice. On the contrary the faces of these judges are reasonable and humane. However final their judgment, the authority they serve maintains order and implements truth. Such is the rule of law among these blacks. The last image featuring Rainsford shows him sitting chained and jailed behind an iron grid in a cell beside a deep romantic chasm. “A benevolent Female of Colour” stands at the grid, giving the anxious prisoner a mango with one hand and holding in the other a basket containing a bottle. Clad in flowing white, a cross prominent on her bosom, this angel of mercy comes to comfort the condemned man. His hard fate takes a romantic turn when love appears to soften death’s blow. A grateful Rainsford receives this unexpected kindness with one hand on his heart. The unsolicited devotion of this woman of color complements the austere but lawful verdict of those black military men. In both Rainsford finds cause to respect, even admire, the sincerity of the people of St. Domingo. The reader last sees him looking up, into the eyes of his nameless benefactress.

The images illustrating Rainsford’s personal story present a highly sympathetic account of St. Domingo’s revolutionaries, at whose head stands the figure of Toussaint Louverture. Few portraits of the indomitable general circulated in England when Rainsford was writing his history. Louis Dubroca’s Life of Toussaint Louverture (1802), a malicious biography immediately translated into English, included a handsome portrait of Toussaint by François Bonneville advertised as “taken from Life.” Verbal descriptions tended to be less flattering. In testimony later compiled by Victor Schoelcher, for instance, Toussaint appears as “a small man, with bright, piercing eyes, a repulsive ugliness and poor build [. . .] with a disagreeable face on which, nevertheless, a certain air of goodness could be discerned.” General Caffarelli, the officer in charge of interrogating Toussaint in France at Fort de Joux, would describe him as having “big eyes, prominent cheekbones, a flat but rather long nose, a large mouth, no upper teeth, a prominent lower jaw with long salient teeth, sunken cheeks, an elongated face.” This description chimes with Toussaint’s known loss of teeth in battle.

Rainsford produced at least two — possibly three — portraits of Toussaint. His first appears in the third edition of his pamphlet on St. Domingo. It shows a peculiarly youthful, round-cheeked black officer, whose jovial girth and eagerness seems wildly at odds with contemporary verbal descriptions, even Rainsford’s own. In An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti, Rainsford testifies that “Toussaint was of a manly form, above the middle stature,
with a countenance bold and striking, yet full of the most prepossessing suavity—terrible to an enemy, but inviting to the objects of friendship or his love,”\textsuperscript{154} a conveniently vague description that leaves more than a little room for artistic license. The visual image he unveils for his readers embodies an independent St. Domingo. Toussaint stands alone, holding a plan of fortifications in one hand, cradling in the other the hilt of a large sheathed sword. His soldiers reconnoiter behind him in the distance. High above him flies a tiny French flag. Toussaint comes between them, harbinger of a new order. In the larger sequence of Rainsford’s images, this one marks the transition from personal adventure to public struggle. It conjures a vision of possibility that momentarily triumphs over wartime atrocities yet to come.

This image lived on to become one of the most familiar representations of Toussaint. He is tall, handsome, and generic: a white man in blackface. A long tradition stands behind this heroic fantasy of blackness.\textsuperscript{155} Rainsford lavishes much more detail on the general’s military dress than his physical features. In the accompanying verbal description, Toussaint wears a red cape covering a “kind of blue jacket, with [. . .] red cuffs, with eight rows of lace on the arms, [. . .] a pair of large gold epaulettes [. . .], scarlet waistcoat and pantaloons, with half boots; round hat, with a red feather, and a national cockade.”\textsuperscript{156} This outfit seems more a colorful military patchwork than a general’s uniform. It evokes the guerilla commander Toussaint had formerly been rather than the French general he had become when Rainsford met him. In the engraving Toussaint wears a conspicuous plumed round hat, an item borrowed directly from the British military uniforms of West Indian Regiments such as Rainsford’s own.\textsuperscript{157} It later entered French military fashion in the West Indies, proving more comfortable in the heat than the traditional bicorn. The downward pointing chevrons on Toussaint’s sleeve similarly reveal a British bias. In the French army they would point upward.\textsuperscript{158} With shirt wide open and coat casually sashed, Rainsford’s Toussaint cuts a romantic figure. He seems a far remove, however, from the man his son Isaac describes, who “always wore a general’s undress uniform and a general’s hat.”\textsuperscript{159} Rainsford’s portrait severs Toussaint from French allegiances, anglicizing this agent of liberty. He more closely resembles a British colonial auxiliary officer than a French general.\textsuperscript{160} The robust leader staring straight at the reader is an anti-French fantasy. His uniform quietly declares independence in the British style. With France dwindling from the picture, Toussaint might just turn blacks into Britons, even as he leads the struggle to transform St. Domingo.

The French return with a vengeance in the latter half of Rainsford’s visual narrative. These engravings depict the brutalities that followed their invasion, rendered with a visceral intensity that far exceeds Rainsford’s verbal descrip-
tions. The title of the next image speaks volumes: “The Mode of exterminating the Black Army practiced by the French.” The image itself simply screams: a placid and mustachioed French officer readies his fist to send a black soldier, arms bound and ankles shackled, reeling into a sea turbulent with black bodies and swimming hounds. The hint here of genocide is hardly accidental. It helps explain the coming engraving, “Revenge taken by the Black Army for the Cruelties practiced on them by the French.” Three black troops hoist high a French officer, rope around his neck, against a landscape dotted with busy gallows. This massacre at least has the legitimacy of revenge. French cruelty requires it. Rainsford’s obvious sympathy with the blacks dissipates when this plate gets reprinted independently—with much greater frequency than its companion piece—reinforcing the very stereotypes the sequence means to dispel.

It would be hard to minimize the savagery of the final two plates, however. These depict the deployment of bloodhounds against black soldiers and civilians. In an appendix devoted to the subject Rainsford describes the lethal force of these weaponized dogs, trained by the Spanish to seek and destroy runaway slaves: “they proceeded to the neighbouring woods, and surprizing an harmless family of laborers at their simple meal, tore the babe from the breast of its mother, or involved the whole party, and returned with their horrid jaws drenched in [. . .] gore.” With a mixture of horror and indignation he cuts himself off in mid-sentence: “the picture becomes too dreadful for description even for the best of purposes.”161 The verbal picture, perhaps, but not the visual one. Rainsford illustrates his description with a gruesome scene of five bloodhounds harrying and holding that harmless black family. Two dogs clamp soldiers in their jaws while a third in the background lunges for the father’s throat. Wife and child, as usual, become collateral damage.

Although news that the French unleashed bloodhounds traveled fast, no published accounts existed when Rainsford was writing his history.162 He relied for his descriptions on his earlier experience in Jamaica, where he witnessed the military deployment of Spanish bloodhounds against rebellious Maroons. From a friend who accompanied the mission to Cuba that procured the dogs and their handlers, Rainsford learned the brutal manner of their training, which he depicts in his final sketch.163 The dogs acquired a taste for flesh by being exposed to a wicker figure filled with goblets of meat. A French commander presents a cage of snarling bloodhounds with this macabre manikin, painted black to synchronize sight with scent. The vicious effects of this grisly practice appear in the distance as dogs gore a group of laborers. Such is Rainsford’s final visual comment on the revolution in St. Domingo. True savagery belongs to the French, who spared no atrocity in their efforts to defeat the black revolution.
For their emotional and ideological impact, Rainsford’s images remain the most influential aspect of *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti*. Reproduced countless times in numerous studies, they still provide a visual backdrop for the Haitian Revolution, at least in English. When contemporary reviewers bothered to comment on the engravings, however, they were hardly enthusiastic. The *British Critic* considered them “ill chosen as to the subjects, and of worse execution. They seem added as an excuse for increasing the price of the book.” The *Edinburgh Review* was even harsher: “We cannot give them any great recommendation for taste or skill; and we are certain that, in some particulars, they have no claim to accuracy. There is not, for example, a single negro represented with any of the features peculiar to his race. Every one has the high skull, and nose, and thin lips, and general expression of the European; so that the negroes of Mr Rainsford’s pencil, are exactly whites with their faces blackened.” However bigoted that observation, it shows Rainsford turning black revolutionaries into Britons. His images may not have been to the liking of British reviewers, but they circulated widely. Toussaint’s portrait in particular became an icon of the British and U.S. abolitionist movements. Such is the ideological force of Rainsford’s graphic representations of revolution in St. Domingo: they pervade the visual rhetoric of black insurgency throughout Atlantic culture.

Rainsford’s influence may extend even further. Among the most familiar images of Toussaint Louverture is one attributed to French artists Nicolas Eustache Maurin and François-Séraphin Delpech that appeared sometime between 1825 and 1838. It depicts the black general in profile, wearing a dress uniform and a plumed bicorn hat. On the strength of an apocryphal story published in the Haitian historian Joseph Saint-Rémy’s *Vie de Toussaint Louverture* (1850), this portrait is traditionally deemed a copy of an older one painted from life and allegedly given by the general himself to the French agent Philippe-Rose Roume de Saint-Laurent. Many different artists have reproduced many different versions of this profile over the years, but the Maurin/Delpech version has always been deemed the earliest. Until now. The unheralded existence of a miniature portrait of Toussaint Louverture troubles this story—a miniature attributed to Rainsford. Painted meticulously in watercolor on a large ivory wafer (2 3/4 x 3 3/4 inches), the miniature resided for many years in the collection of a prominent South Carolinian family, the Rutledges, who claimed to have obtained it from Rainsford himself. It appeared as part of an exhibition of miniatures at the Gibbes Museum in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1936. The exhibition catalog credits Marcus Rainsford, “Captain in the 3rd West India Regiment,” with painting a renowned image of the renowned general. Heirs sold it twenty years later to the New-York Historical Society, where the miniature now resides.
a startling image, not only for Toussaint’s stark expression and steady gaze. If Rainsford indeed had a hand in creating it, the image disrupts the whole visual tradition of representing Toussaint. It shows Toussaint Louverture in the profile made famous by Maurin and Delpech. It differs from known versions by picturing him in full bust, holding a map that bears the dim words “Carte de l’isle de St Domingue.” Details of the uniform match those of other images, from the plumed hat to the leafy collar and the belt across Toussaint’s chest. Its style of execution and display, however, indicates that this miniature predates the Maurin and Delpech engraving. The canonical history of Louverture’s likenesses requires revision. The mysterious original possessed
by the Roume family must contend for prominence of place with this early miniature, possibly painted by a hand that shook Toussaint’s. Perhaps the miniature also copies that lost original. Perhaps it copies other copies. But perhaps, however preposterous, Rainsford’s miniature is that original, the famous image of Toussaint from which later versions descend.

Rainsford attests that his sketches for An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti, including that of Toussaint, were inspired by his experience. That both the miniature and the full-length portraits show the general holding a military document do not establish proof of a shared origin, but it is tempting to see significance in this detail. At the very least the miniature raises the possibility that Rainsford, the man responsible for creating the two most popular portraits of Toussaint in the English world, also influenced Toussaint’s most infamous “French” portrait—inflammatory, because accusations of racial stereotyping have long accompanied its scholarly analysis. Although many commentators accept its likeness, some take it to express French racism and scorn, arguing that it commits petty vengeance on the charismatic leader by exaggerating his least attractive features.174 Painted by the hand of a known admirer, however, this small portrait becomes an act of homage. By far the least Anglicized of Rainsford’s images, it represents not just Toussaint Louverture, but also the vexed effort of a British officer to see him truly. It may not be Toussaint’s best likeness. But it could well be the most influential. Whether Rainsford created or merely copied it, he would have inserted himself permanently into the enduring legacy of Toussaint’s portraits. The sharp profile and military dress continue to inspire a stirring iconography of black resistance.

Common Causes

“The close of the eighteenth century, a period marked by the grandest operations and the most gigantic projects, presented to the world, a new and organised empire, where it was not only supposed to be impossible to exist, but, where even its existence was denied, although it was known by those connected with that quarter of the globe to have taken place, and under the most flourishing auspices.”175 Rainsford writes of the Haitian Revolution as a global event, one among many gigantic projects, but unique for being both stunningly successful and largely ignored. An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti was published just one year after Dessalines’s declaration of an independent Haiti. No European power had yet extended diplomatic recognition—or would for nearly thirty years.176 Rainsford wrote in part to remind
his readers that Haiti was a legitimate state. The aim of his narrative is thus double: not merely to provide an authoritative full account, the first in English, of the thirteen years of war in St. Domingo that ended in independence, but also to urge prevailing powers to acknowledge this astonishing victory and the once enslaved people who won it. What a curious irony, then, that his book has never seen republication since its original appearance!

Rainsford’s history has nevertheless achieved a prominent if ambiguous position amidst the historical literature of the Haitian Revolution. *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* provides an important early perspective on an event whose legacy continues to shape the world. C. L. R. James’s magisterial portrait of Toussaint Louverture and the revolution he served, *The Black Jacobins*, didn’t help Rainsford’s reputation by dismissing his and similar histories as “little more than propaganda pamphlets.” While Rainsford clearly delivers his account from a British point of view, it is one surprisingly critical of the policies it was his duty as a soldier in His Majesty’s army to serve. It may be impossible to mistake him for an abolitionist or a Republican, but he wrote with an unusual sympathy for the blacks he fought both with and against, particularly for an officer mustering troops in St. Domingo in order to defend slavery.

Perhaps the personal story at the center of his history obscures its ideological agenda. Rainsford pitched his book partly as private adventure. The exhaustive title of his first pamphlet promises “A Memoir of Transactions that took place in St. Domingo,” including a sketch of “The Real Character of its Black Governor, Toussaint L’Ouverture” and a narrative of “the Rescue of a British Officer under Sentence of Death.” Racy stuff—and according to Rainsford, true. His adventure as accidental spy in Cape François—captured and sentenced to death at Fort Liberté, jailed but comforted by a beautiful Creole maid—adds an element of romance to an already monumental history. So too his personal encounter with the legendary Toussaint. Who alive in England could boast playing billiards with St. Domingo’s architect of freedom? Who alive in England owed Toussaint his life? Rainsford’s story gives his history a romantic aura that, unintentionally perhaps, blunts its ideological edge.

Looking past the personal, however, reveals a portrait of Toussaint that deserves comparison with James’s. James helped create the Toussaint familiar to recent students of the Haitian Revolution: bold, ubiquitous, enlightened, relentless, and flawed. James’s Toussaint is a tragic figure, a skilled and intelligent Creole inspired and ultimately beaten by the ideals of the French Revolution. He dies for liberty and equality, partly out of his undying devotion to France. That contradiction—between Enlightenment ideals and their politi-
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Toussaint’s tragic flaw: his decision, however vexed, to abandon the revolutionary black masses. Toussaint simply can’t believe that Napoleon intends to re-enslave or exterminate them. He chooses France—and falls to Enlightenment ideals and French perfidy. Behind this Toussaint stands a long legacy of tragic figures, most potently Shakespeare’s Hamlet. By placing Toussaint so adroitly in this European tragic tradition, James not only reveals the limits of Enlightenment ideals, their hankering after blood but he also charts a path beyond Toussaint and tragedy that only a true avenger can follow: a swift sword called Dessalines.

Rainsford’s Toussaint is peculiarly free from the inner torment of the tragic hero. He is a paragon of virtue, an intelligent leader, a tender husband and father: a man whose “powers of invention in the art of war, and domestic government,” are “the wonder of those who surrounded, or opposed him.” On the battlefield he is a force of nature, riding indefatigably from engagement to engagement, rallying troops and harrying enemies. In the camp he is a wise counselor, preferring mercy to vengeance, life to justifiable punishment. To the oppressor he is a scourge; to the oppressed a staff of comfort. So uncomplicated and true is his character that it ranks with the best that civilization has achieved:

Had a sanguinary revenge occupied his mind, he would not so often have offered those pathetic appeals to the understanding, which were the sport of his colleagues, on crimes which the governors of nations long civilized would have sentenced to torture! His principles, when becoming an actor in the revolution of his country, were as pure and legitimate, as those which actuated the great founders of liberty in any former age or clime.

This Toussaint is as purposeful as he is uncomplicated: a man with no inner contradictions to compromise his devotion to liberty and his people. He is a match for any leader in any age, equal to the best of Europe’s political reformers and immune to the contradictions that plague its tragic heroes. This Toussaint is an epic hero. He is a warrior, gifted in understanding but unburdened by interiority. He is lettered, cultured, and controlled.

Above all he is not French. Where James stresses Toussaint’s devotion to France and the ideals of the revolution, even to the point of downfall, Rainsford paints a less nationalist portrait. Toussaint serves the cause not of French liberty but liberty pure and simple, a concept capacious enough to include the British. This Toussaint, looming larger than mere “propaganda,” becomes a character British readers can admire—precisely because his fate exceeds his ability to choose it. He is less a tragic hero than a victim of history, and the force that destroys him, implacably, is France. Rainsford completely down-
plays Toussaint’s allegiance to the Republic, to the point that St. Domingo under his governance is for all practical purposes already independent—a vision meant to anticipate the coming Black Empire of Hayti. That the British after Napoleon’s invasion would prefer an independent state to a French colony was both clear and commercially imperative. Toussaint falls only to French guile: “Great as he had always been, he was now surprised for the first time, by a band of authorised assassins, whom armies had never been able to perplex.” Great warriors deserve better than sneaking assassins. Rainsford’s Toussaint dies a strangely British death, martyred by the French less to Enlightenment ideals than an even higher sense of martial valor and his people’s freedom.

An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti does not pretend to political objectivity. But neither is France Rainsford’s only object of criticism, as the following reflection on Toussaint’s incarceration shows so clearly: “France forgot awhile the habits of a civilized nation, to entomb one she should have graced with a public triumph; and England, instead of making a common cause to annihilate a nation of heroes, and depress the human intellect when rising to its level, should have guarded from violation the rights of humanity in its person.” Rainsford proves no toady of Pitt, Dundas, and the Duke of York. His indictment of British policy is clear: it shares with that of France a vicious antagonism (genocidal in spirit) toward the blacks of St. Domingo, that “nation of heroes.” It is here, in his attitude regarding those black freedom fighters, that Rainsford reveals the complexity of his ideological aims, their irreducibility to simple propaganda. His book both narrates the rise of an independent Haiti and describes—with extraordinary sympathy—the exemplary lives of its black inhabitants.

Abolitionist he was not. Rainsford’s position on slavery is more complicated than that of either its foes or advocates. By the time An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti was published in 1805, the abolition of the slave trade was all but a foregone conclusion. It had been a long time coming. The Somerset decision of 1772 gave the movement a legal precedent of sorts. The Quakers were first to mount a moral campaign against the slave trade, but as Christopher Leslie Brown shows in Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism, that campaign gained public approval only after Britain’s loss of the North America colonies raised the question of slavery in a climate of anxiety about empire. Granville Sharpe, Thomas Clarkson, and even the pious Clapham Sect made slavery a litmus test of legitimate empire, turning the slave trade into its guilty conscience. These were hard claims to sustain during Britain’s military bid for St. Domingo, but increasingly persuasive after evacuation in 1798. As an officer stationed twice in the West Indies,
Rainsford had ample opportunity to reflect on the relationship between empire and slave labor. He never advocated an end to slavery. And yet he acquired vastly more experience of both imperial adventurism and its indebtedness to enslaved Africans than most avid abolitionists.

Probably as a result of mustering black recruits for much of his career, Rainsford gained an enormous respect for the way they served on the field and lived at home. That in no way meant he advocated their freedom. His position was that of a father confronted with children suddenly seeking to live their own lives: a paternalism that mixed skepticism and confusion with grudging respect. That the chaos of revolution could have been avoided in St. Domingo he had no doubt. The fault lay with masters, to whom Rainsford always attributes a civilized superiority. “If happily discerning the signs of the times, the planters of this delightful and flourishing colony” had “conciliated the affections of those to whose labours, under the present regimen, every thing productive of wealth or prosperity must depend,” revolution may never have erupted. “If they had then contemplated some more legitimate means of prosecuting the labours of their colony, they might, however immediately unavailing, have laid a foundation for their posterity more lasting than the bequest of inordinate wealth, and have claimed the approbation of society.”

But no, the planters only exploited the enslaved. Buried here is the suggestion, not a pretty one, that a conciliated slavery might at least have maintained the subordination of blacks. Rainsford’s paternalism leads him to conclude that he knows what’s best for both the planters and enslaved Africans.

But it also forces him to acknowledge the legitimate claim of the enslaved to liberty. It’s a problem of dialectical proportions, and Rainsford can find no way around it, although he wants to. On the penultimate page of his history, he offers hard advice to those who still profit from the shackles: “to the Proprietors of the British colonies in particular it is recommended, to think of an inducement to some degree of devotion among their slaves an object of importance, with a careful diffusion of morality.” Why this plea for inspiring devotion and diffusing morality? Here’s why: such concessions are “more certain than all the inflictions, that coercive measures can devise to prevent a spirit of deliberation (the first revolutionary system) among slaves.”

Rainsford tips his hand. The practitioners of slavery must inhibit deliberation among the enslaved, or else. Once reflection sets in, so does revolution, and there’s not much anyone, British or French, can do about it.

Here then is the upside of Rainsford’s paternalism. It acknowledges the alliance of deliberation with freedom: not a radical politics, perhaps, but enough to legitimate the violent overthrow of French planters in St. Domingo. Wit-
ness the uprising of the black freedom fighters. Witness the military paragon Toussaint. Witness Dessalines’s proclamation of April 28, 1804. In Rainsford’s view, “a specimen of this kind of composition [. . .] is a positive refutation of those who, in opposition to reason and notoriety, describe the inhabitants of Hayti as being in a ‘savage state.’ It burns with all the fire of martial oratory, while breathing that bewitching eloquence which entwines and captivates the heart.” Rainsford may not advocate freedom for the enslaved. But faced with the obvious greatness of their achievements as soldiers, workers, and politicians, liberalism overwhelms bigotry and leads him to acknowledge “this singular, and important part of the human species.”

Perhaps Rainsford’s personal adventures, then, are not what remain most valuable about An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti. Perhaps its most lasting contribution is less to the knowledge of the Haitian Revolution (piles of books written since have told a fuller story) than to an appreciation—from an unabashedly British perspective—of the free blacks who even in the shadow of foreign occupation were reinventing St. Domingo. Rainsford’s vivid description of their everyday lives offers a brief, exhilarating glimpse of the freedoms they were fighting to achieve and sustain. It presents a strangely attractive picture of a living commons, a kind of counter-memory to not only European colonialism but also its civil stepchild, liberal democracy. Equality in this commons is a collective, not an individuated attribute. Living black is being together. “The usual subordinations of society were entirely disregarded,” Rainsford writes, witnessing “for the first time, a real system of equality.” His universal antipathy to things French and Republican makes such an observation all the more compelling. Among the blacks of Cape François he experienced as never before a disconcerting equality that redrew the boundaries between “mine” and “yours,” for instance at meal time: “Here were officers and privates, the colonel and the drummer, at the same table indiscriminately; and the writer had been scarcely seated at a repast in the first room to which he was conducted, when a fat negro, to initiate him in the general system, helped himself frequently from his dish, and took occasion to season his character by large draughts of the wine, accompanied with the address of ‘Mon Americain.’” Rainsford’s American disguise lowered his British profile at a time when his presence at Cape François would have been that of an enemy combatant. Miming the foreigner, he encounters a deeper foreignness: a life in common in which differences between mine and yours, American and French, black and white cease for a time to matter. He lives a conviviality grounded not in wit but simple eating. However briefly, Rainsford sweeps the curtain away from rank and British posture and shares with common strangers a meal, a laugh, and life.
It’s as a record of this life in common that *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* still has much to communicate about the aims and ends of the Haitian Revolution. Sometimes its observations are exhilarating: “Negroes, recollected in the lowest state of slavery, including Africans, filled situations of trust and responsibility; they were, likewise, in many instances, occupied by those who had been in superior circumstances under the old regimen, free negroes, and mulattoes.”193 Perhaps in spite of himself—and only intermittently—Rainsford produces an ethnography of a people on the verge of birth, whether ever fully delivered is for history to decide. Basic human practices are different among these free blacks, not uncivilized in Rainsford’s view so much as incommensurable with European customs.

Such is his experience of family in Cape François. Welcomed into the home of “a brigand of peculiar intelligence” (the phase sums up Rainsford’s non-plussed perceptions), he finds “the whole so compact, and clean, with such an air of *propérté* [sic] throughout as was absolutely attractive.”194 Homemade furniture abounds, as do books, including “a mutilated volume of Volney’s Travels.”195 As do wives and children: two wives and thirteen children, to be exact. They don’t all live under this particular roof, but those who do share a “singular bedstead” that could be rearranged according to the needs of the moment. Rainsford adds in an aside that “it might have been adapted to the European cottage with many advantages,” an offhand remark that traffics in the possibility not only of creolized domestic comforts but of cultural exchange between blacks and whites. While he observes stereotypically that “continence is not a virtue of the blacks,” he openly admires the way they regulate a domestic economy far more complicated and fluid than its European counterpart.196 Family among the black revolutionaries presents a challenge that Rainsford seems open to imagining.

He proves a genuine admirer, too, of their economy: “the productive system of the earth seemed to be founded on original principles.”197 Formerly enslaved cultivators now work the field in a coordinated way that benefits all in common. Notice the relation Rainsford observes between the one and the many: “Every individual employed a portion of his time in labor, and received an allotted part of the produce for his reward, while all took the field, from a sense of duty to themselves.”198 Utopian? Perhaps. But historical, too. Rainsford witnesses the emergence of a new order that never fully emerges, a collectivity that labors together to sustain life in common. Labor as here lived owes something to African habits and something to European principles, but it remains appropriate to the people performing it, a function of their struggles, aspirations, and victories. Missing is the martial husbandry of Toussaint the agrarian, who ordered free blacks back to their former plan-
tations to work for wages and a share under threat of military punishment. Compared to familiar Western prejudices, too, such work in common has much to recommend it: “Labor was so much abridged, that no want of leisure was felt; it would be a great gratification to the feeling heart, to see the peasant in other countries with a regulated toil similar to that of the laborer in St. Domingo.” What is good for the peasant could be good for the career officer, and Rainsford senses it. The blacks of Cape François practice a common economics that directs the labor of one to the care of the many: a prospect that remains to this day revolutionary.

An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti reads in retrospect like both the celebration of a world to come and an elegy for a world that never arrived. However unevenly, it acknowledges the overwhelming strength of black resistance to white domination in St. Domingo and holds the door open to the forms of life that might arise in the aftermath of revolution. Rainsford’s little part in the doomed British occupation of the colony taught him something about the arrogance and the limits of imperial power: “Such was the end of this disastrous enterprize, which had for five years fed the hopes and vanity of the British empire, to which had been latterly sacrificed many valuable lives, and an extravagant portion of the public money. That it was undertaken with too little consideration, must be always acknowledged. [. . .] It is, however, probable, that no force which could have been furnished, would have been sufficient to cope with the power of the revolted negroes.” Rainsford writes as a friend to those revolutionary blacks and a fellow soldier on the field of freedom. His history of their revolution concedes their indomitable force. In spite of his prejudices, he came to admire these freedom fighters and their fierce devotion to the bloody project of transforming a slave colony into an independent state.

Rainsford was himself no revolutionary. He had no fear of a black planet. The Black Empire in Haiti was perfectly compatible with a British Empire of global reach. An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti manages to celebrate the virtues of both. To imperial adventurism in the name of national interest and influence, Rainsford replies with a cautionary account of insurrection in the name of liberty, “a Revolution, which ranks among the most remarkable and important transactions of the day”—his and ours. The Haitian Revolution continues to inspire dreams of independence because, partly thanks to Rainsford, this remarkable transaction remains indomitably alive in the annals of history.