

The Life of John Bourden

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Abstract

The Irish in the Caribbean during the seventeenth century has recently been the subject of study on both sides of the Atlantic. In this research, Jamaica only featured sporadically, and thus warranted further exploration. In this article, recent research uncovered both on Jamaica and Ireland resulted in the case study of the Coleraine-born John Bourden, president of the Council. The focus is on the period of the Cromwellian conquest in 1655 to the destructive earthquake of 1692, a small number of Irish arrived on the island that became small planters, tradesmen and domestic servants. This study intends to expand the historical understanding of the Irish presence in the Caribbean by considering how the protestant and catholic settlers from Ireland functioned in the emerging Jamaican society.

The Member for St. Catherine

John Bourden was born in 1633 in Coleraine, Co. Londonderry, a town that was part of the Plantation of Ulster and built by English colonists.¹ The first years of Bourden's life were turbulent as wars ravaged the country and the native Irish attacked the settlement. How John Bourden eventually arrived on Jamaica is unknown but there is some speculation that he might have travelled from one of the other islands or possibly had family in Jamaica (Cundall 1935: 140-142). However, considering his military background, Bourden probably arrived with the Irish regiment that landed in Jamaica in the spring of 1657. The following four years such experienced Irish soldiers fought against the remnants of the Spanish

¹ Implemented at the start of the seventeenth century by James I, the Plantation saw ownership of lands transferred to English settlers. This was most prominent in the North-West of present-day Northern Ireland, where the London companies took possession.

settlers. After 1660, Bourden continued his military service and became part of the officers' class. In contrast to some of his fellow soldiers, who either perished or moved to North America, or remained in the army for little pay. In general, the Catholic Irish on Jamaica settled on the smaller plots of land, grew crops for the local market or herded cattle (Dunn 1972: 154-155).

At the start of the 1670s, Bourden had settled in the parish of St Catherine on the southern part of Jamaica, close to Spanish Town, the capital. According to the James Modyford survey he maintained an estate of 2,255 acres and had risen to the rank of captain (Sainsbury 1889: 98-104). When the military campaign for the conquest of Jamaica had ended in 1660, the defence of the island was organised in militias. This was a common practise on the Caribbean islands, where in the case of martial law being declared, servants and other able men were called up to serve. In his role as captain, Bourden would have had a number of the Irish servants and small holders under him. The experience in Coleraine must have influenced his view of the Catholic Irish, who were generally suspected of collaborating with the French and Spanish. As in other English colonies, Catholics could not hold senior positions in the militia or sit in the local assembly. Taking these positions would force them to swear the oath of supremacy. The latter meant accepting the King as the head of the established church, something that was in direct conflict with their religion, where the Pope had this position. Despite these restrictions, there were no reports of any problems with the Irish in Jamaica. For the planters, the militias meant that part of their labour force was called away and it forced the smallholders to abandon their small pieces of land. It made the militias very unpopular with the population in the seventeenth century, and there were constant problems with filling the ranks. In contrast, Bourden benefited from his position in the militia, when the Council ruled to keep his property under guard during a slave revolt in 1676 (Cundall 1935: 140).

The head of the colonial government of Jamaica was the governor, who was assisted by a small number of advisors in the Council. Elections were held at regular intervals for a local assembly that could propose bills and amend ones submitted by the governor. By the middle of the 1670s, Bourden was deemed prolific enough to stand for the local assembly elections, and on 26 April 1675 he took his seat as the elected member for the parish of Vere. To participate in the democratic process, both the voter and the candidate had to have funds and property at their disposal. In March 1677, Bourden was again elected, this time to represent Spanish Town, the capital. In contrast, many of the Irish smallholders and servants were excluded from the elections, as only freeholders were able to vote. Even when a small number of them were eligible, the reports showed that many people did not avail of their voting rights and candidates often had

to be persuaded to take up their seats. After his election to the assembly, Bourden was selected to inform the governor that the assembly was in session. During its proceedings, 'Major John Bourden brought from the house four bills' and he became deeply involved with the factional politics. Since the assembly was established in the 1660s, two opposing factions had emerged. One consisted of the big planters on the island who had established themselves after the conquest of Jamaica had been completed. The second group was made up of the leading privateers and the merchants trading out of Port Royal. Throughout the seventeenth century the privateers and merchants hampered local decision-making, and the English government tried at various times to exercise control over their actions. The planters also had self-interest at heart as they sabotaged the governor's attempt to gain tax-raising powers (Aikman 1811I: 12-19). In September 1677, Bourden was elected to the parish of St. Catherine and remained elected for every subsequent assembly.

In April 1678, lieutenant-governor Henry Morgan called a Council of War, as the islanders were in fear of a French invasion. The Catholic Irish found themselves under suspicion for colluding with the French. Morgan exaggerated the threat and the attack never materialised, but it was the first Council meeting that Bourden attended. When martial law was declared, he was one of the senior officers in the general's regiment (Minutes of the Council I: 300-4). This regiment, the largest on the island, consisted mostly of those living in Port Royal, where the majority of Irish servants were living. During the event, the army was not called into action, but the episode did highlight Bourden's importance and the part the militia played in his life. In this period of increasing threat to the island, Bourden's role in the assembly continued to grow in importance, reflected by his increasing responsibility and obligations. He was asked to request the vicar to perform the prayer every morning and was part of the committee considering the bills. In August 1679 during another session, Bourden was again invited to see the governor, to become a member of committees and to meet with the Council.

The assembly and the politics of local government had little effect on the Irish smallholders and servants. Only the conflict between the Assembly and the governor caused confusion for the smallholders about how they were about to be taxed (Dunn 1972: 158). At the start of the 1680s, the rivalry between the planter faction and the former privateers was augmented by the announcement that Sir Thomas Lynch had been appointed the new governor.² Lynch quickly called an assembly where Bourden was to play his most prominent role yet through regular meetings with the governor. At the end of September 1681, 'Major Bourden and

² Lynch, not an Irishman by birth, was a prominent planter who had been part of the original Cromwellian expedition in 1655.

Mr. Broughton were ordered to wait for the governor, and acquaint him to the house' (Aikman 1811 I: 58). Unlike previous sessions, Lynch did not dissolve the assembly or call any further elections. When a member was absent or had died he was simply replaced. Bourden remained in the assembly as one of its most senior members until the end of 1683. On 27 December of that year, Bourden was made a Councillor and had 'taken the oath of allegiance and supremacy and was admitted one of His Majesty's Council' (Minutes of the Council II: 78.). He became part of the higher echelons of the island's elite and a close confidant of the governor.

The presence of John Bourden on the Council indicated that there were opportunities for people from Ireland to climb the social ladder. As a protestant Irishman, Bourden faced no restrictions while his consistent presence in the assembly and senior rank in the militia made him an obvious choice. However, his most testing time in local politics was yet to come in the decade that followed.

Councillor Bourden

A war with the Maroons was to dominate much of the 1680s, causing problems for a number of Irish smallholders and servants as plantations and settlements were attacked.³ Bourden's plantation was also under threat, while he also had to deal with a troublesome period on the Council. He was now part of the governing elite of the island, and the councillors met on a more regular basis to advise the governor and to deal with petitions and issues of law and order. In January 1684, Bourden was called to task when asked to carry out the court martial of Captain Archibald who had used 'many violent and unbecoming expressions' (Fortescue 1898 XI: 584) when addressing governor Lynch. On the 19 January 'Col. John Bourden [was to] be associated with the commission' (*Minutes of the Council* II: 82) in Port Royal where the court marshal was to take place. The governor and the Council were at odds with the lawyer Roger Elletson who represented the former privateers, including Archibald. Lynch died in 1684 and was succeeded by Hender Molesworth.

The local intrigue continued under the new lieutenant governor when Councillor Ivy questioned the validity of Molesworth's appointment and Bourden's installation to the Council. He 'asked to see the king's letter by which Bourden was appointed' (Fortescue 1898 XI: 683) but was quickly rebuked and eventually suspended. The former privateers openly attempted to undermine the planter government. The Maroon war continued to cause problems, notably in St Catherine where some of the Irish worked on the oldest plantations of the island. Here, a violent slave-rebellion erupted around Guanaboa Vale in 1685 and Bourden was called

³ Militias of runaway slaves, who had settled in the mountains of Jamaica.

in to control it. After ten days, the rising had been suppressed and prisoners detained while Bourden carried out the court martial. The rebellion and the response to it caused further disturbances and awards were offered to catch the perpetrators. Bourden was ordered to 'repair the several plantations at Guanaboa and parts adjacent and there in the most convenient manner make the negroes sensible of the promised reward encouraging them to use their endeavours in killing and destroying the rebellious negroes' (*Minutes of the Council II*: 234). It was to bear very little fruit and by early February 1686 the resistance re-emerged and the Council was forced to send in more troops. Once again, Bourden played a significant role in the operation.

Bourden's relationship with those of African descent was in all likelihood minimal. The Irish servants, like elsewhere in the Caribbean, had closer contact with black slaves, but there were no reports of them joining in the rebellion as had been the case in Barbados decades earlier. The number of Irish in Jamaica was small (roughly a thousand, based on the James Modyford survey) and the prospect of acquiring land on easy terms made them unlikely to revolt (Dunn 1972: 164-5). Many of the Irish smallholders could not afford to buy any slaves and violence threatened their families and their crops. Therefore, the protection provided by Bourden and his regiment was vital to their survival.

Suspension

The Duke of Albemarle's time as governor at the end of the 1680s caused great upheaval in the local government. The Duke, who found himself in financial trouble, had asked James II to appoint him governor of Jamaica. He hoped to enrich himself with the salvaging of wrecks, a common scheme in this period. As a peer of the realm Albemarle brought a different dimension to the social life on the island. He quickly sided with Henry Morgan and the privateers and gradually removed the planters from power. While many of his friends left for England, Bourden stayed in Jamaica and remained on the Council. It was not long however, before there was a confrontation with Albemarle. The Duke had appointed Roger Elletson as chief justice and this was an affront to Bourden who 'desired to be excused from sitting as one of the assistant judges' (*Minutes of the Council III*: 27th February 1688). Once this was granted, the Irishman left the room. Bourden did not attend the following two Council sessions, and on 5 March 1688 Albemarle had enough reasons to remove him completely from the Council. The Duke decreed, 'he that refuses the King in one capacity is not fit to serve him in any other and therefore his grace thinks fit and does now actually suspend the said Col. Bourden' (*Minutes of the Council III*: 5th March 1688). Bourden would play no further part in local politics during the remainder of Albemarle's tenure.

In contrast to Bourden's demise, the reign of Albemarle brought a new situation for the Catholic Irish on the island as King James II insisted on greater religious freedoms. The number of Catholics on Jamaica was difficult to ascertain, as they were a more clandestine presence and restricted in their worship. After James II had been crowned, an English priest, Thomas Churchill, began to lobby the court for greater tolerance of the Catholics in Jamaica. He asked 'that a priest be sent to minister the faithful on the island' (Osborne 1988: 127). This led to Churchill accompanying Albemarle to establish a church on the island. The governor's instructions included 'You are to give all protection, countenance and encouragement to our Roman Catholic subjects in our island of Jamaica, and particularly to doctor Churchill whom we have appointed chief pastor over them' (Osborne 1988: 128).

The new priest came into direct conflict with the powerful slave trader James Castillo.⁴ As a wealthy man, he had converted one of the rooms in his house in Port Royal into a chapel to celebrate mass. On arrival, Churchill established a small church in Spanish Town and quickly petitioned Albemarle to shut down the chapel in Port Royal. Castillo published a 'Cuban Manifesto' by Fr. John Baptist Dempsey arguing that only the archbishop of Havana could make appointments in the region. The governor called Fr. Dempsey to testify and it soon became clear that Castillo was trying to obstruct Churchill from practising his faith. The slave trader's position on the island became untenable when his arrest was ordered. Dempsey and Castillo quickly escaped to Cuba (Osborne 1988: 130-4).

The entire period of Albemarle's governorship was characterised by the rise of Catholics in public positions. The elections for the assembly in January 1688 had given some seats to Catholics, but all of them seemed to be of English origin. For the Irish, having to swear an oath of supremacy remained an obstacle. However, when a letter was sent to the governor thanking him for the introduction of religious freedoms, the signatories included Bryan M'Grath and Redmond M'Raugh (Osborne 1988: 129). Although there was no reference to their place of origin in Ireland, it must be considered plausible that some of the support for Albemarle came from the Catholic Irish on the island. There was no suggestion however that the Albemarle had any specific interest in the Irish. The Duke died in September 1688 and Churchill returned to England soon after without appointing a successor.

⁴ Castillo was Spanish born but had naturalised under Molesworth. He held the *assiento*, the right to trade slaves on the island.

Return to the Council

The late 1680s was a period of political turmoil as the Glorious Revolution brought a change in government and the arrival of the Earl of Inchiquin as governor of Jamaica. As an Irishman, Inchiquin was looked upon with a certain amount of suspicion, and rumours about his religious affiliation quickly undermined his position. An Irish peer at the head of government with a small number of Irish Catholics at the lower end of society made for an interesting situation. Other than the Catholic Irish, the wealthy local planter, John Bourden, was never regarded with any suspicion concerning his country of birth and a long period of dedicated service seemed to absolve him from any suspicion. In the months after his suspension from the Council, Bourden disappeared from public view and retired to his estate, but retained his rank in the militia. In February 1689, instructions were sent from London to have Bourden and others reinstated. Since the death of Albemarle, the responsibility for the local government had fallen to Francis Watson. As President of the Council, Watson had limited powers and could not call an assembly for instance. It was a testing time to be on the Council and Bourden quickly found that he was still in the minority as Albemarle's legacy lingered. For the Catholic Irish, it meant a return to a more repressive regime as the war with France saw an increasing threat to Jamaica developing.

When Watson received the King's orders in March 1689, he stalled over the reappointments and Bourden did not return for his first Council meeting until 4 June 1689. Watson had ensured that the planters were not going to gain control again by adding two more councillors to retain the balance of power. They included William Ivy, who had questioned Bourden's admission to the Council. During this period, the French privateer Laurens threatened to attack the island. On 3 December the Council ordered that Port Royal was put under guard with the troop selection 'left to the discretion of colonel Bourden' (Fortescue 1899 XII: 186-7). The next day in the Council it was also decided that two men out of Bourden's regiment were to guard the prison in Port Royal. Watson remarked that 'there were but three Roman Catholics in the militia, who at once quitted their commands' (Fortescue 1899 XII: 59). By the end of the 1680s, Port Royal had grown to become the largest English port in the region. Many merchants, government officials and wealthy planters that lived in the town had large households and needed servants. As on Barbados, they initially looked for poor whites to settle on the island on an indenture. It meant serving for five or seven years to pay back the cost of the passage. Many Irish had used this method in the seventeenth century to emigrate (Rodgers 2007: 30-55). But by the time Jamaica was conquered, the numbers had declined sharply and the authorities had great difficulty attracting servants.

In May 1690, in anticipation of Inchiquin, Bourden and the other councillors brought Watson under control. William O'Brien, the second Earl of Inchiquin was born in 1638 into Irish nobility that could trace his lineage back to the high kings of Ireland. As a supporter of William and Mary, he was keen to fulfil his post and the Lords of Trade realised that they needed an experienced soldier as well as an apt administrator to govern Jamaica. The absent planters supported the appointment of someone with military experience but had misgivings over the powers he was given. In addition to his political powers, Inchiquin was provided with an interest in the slave trade. And like Albemarle, he received a percentage of any treasure found in wrecks. The arrival of the new governor on the 31 May must have caused dismay with the local elite. He was no peer of the realm like Albemarle was, but a one-eyed battle hardened Irish soldier who approached the local political sensitivities with disdain. The Irish on the island must have looked at their fellow Irishman with a mixture of surprise and pride. That one of their own was sent over to reorganise the government of the island must have surprised them. For the smallholders on the island a return to proper law and order was a blessing. The lack of a functioning justice system caused serious problems when dealing with disputes over land or other issues.

The period under Inchiquin saw Watson removed from the Council, the courts restored, and an attempt to suspend the laws approved under Albemarle. An assembly that was called in June 1691 once again proved to be uncooperative. Inchiquin was too impatient, despite the fact that the planter faction was returned as the majority in the house. Bourden became a close advisor to his fellow Irishman, as he understood the workings of both the assembly and the Council. Their Irish connections might have played a role in this, although this was not evident from the sources. When the assembly set up a committee to lobby for the island's interest back in London, Bourden and two other councillors joined to decide how it would be financed. Inchiquin later wrote about these proposals that 'the governor they left out was as if he were a Judas, not to be trusted with the other seven apostles. Beckford and Bourden had the assurance to state in the Council that its chief use was to solicit against a governor' (Fortescue 1899 XII: 522-4). Evidently, the members of the committee felt that Inchiquin's temper would be more of a hindrance than a help and had avoided his inclusion altogether. Perceived as a snub, Bourden advised the governor against signing this bill into law. The bad-tempered Inchiquin dissolved the assembly soon after. Illness remained a serious problem and the governor spent twelve days in bed with 'a violent fever' (Fortescue 1899 XII: 335-7). For the rest of the year the government in Jamaica was at a stand still as Inchiquin's health deteriorated.

When he died in January 1692, Inchiquin already had appointed John White as president of the Council. To the Irish smallholders, the

continuation of the same type of local government must have met with approval. Bourden was passed over on this occasion despite being one of the more senior members. In January 1692, the Council sent a letter to London noting that ‘no member has been suspended but we are told by common fame and threatening speeches that several of our members are misrepresenting the King by misbehaving at the Council board’. The councillors feared that they might be removed at a whim and asked ‘that no Councillor may be suspended or discharged except by the King’s immediate order unless by advice of a full Council’. To avoid cases such as Bourden’s suspension they also asked ‘that if a governor judges us to be unfit for the King or his own service we may be discharged at once’ (Fortescue 1899 XII: 592-6).

The business of local government continued without much incident into the summer months of 1692. It was rumoured that Inchiquin’s widow travelled back to England ‘having there declared herself a papist’ while his youngest son was still on the island.⁵ The eldest brother had inherited the titles and James O’Brien received his father’s part in the slave trading company in Jamaica.⁶ However, the hostility towards the young man must have been considerable and soon it was reported to the Council that ‘Colonel James O’Brien resigned the command of the forts in Port Royal’ (Fortescue 1899 XII: 619-620). In May, the French attacked the north side of the island and a large force was dispatched to defend it. For the Irish smallholders on that side of the island the threat remained as well as the harsh living conditions. By the middle of June it was confirmed that the former speaker William Beeston was appointed governor of Jamaica.

President of the Council

On the 7 June 1692, an earthquake struck Jamaica, devastating a large part of the basin where Port Royal was situated. This was a turning point in the island’s history as it severely affected the lives of all people, including the Irish. A large section of the city was swallowed up by the sea and the councillors fled to one of the ships in the harbour noting that ‘on the 7th inst., there was a dreadful earthquake which in ten minutes threw down all the churches, dwelling houses and sugar works on the island. Two thirds of Port Royal was swallowed up by the sea, and a great part of its inhabitants were miserably knocked on the head or drowned’ (Fortescue 1899 XII: 651-2). A thousand people died on the day itself and nearly two thousand

⁵ *Letter from John Pulteney to Lord Coningsby*, 26 April 1692, D/638/13/138 (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland).

⁶ The eldest son of the second Earl was also called William, which caused some confusion. Cundall maintains that the Earl accompanied William of Orange to Dublin in 1690. As he arrived in Jamaica prior to the battle of the Boyne, it must be concluded that this was the son, the future third Earl.

more after the onset of disease and looting in the weeks that followed. One of those who fell ill was the president of the Council. Many of the Irish servants who worked in the large houses in Port Royal would have been killed or succumbed to the effects of disease. Spanish Town was not spared either and the buildings there were damaged and a number of people killed by falling debris and landslides. For Bourden the devastation must have been enormous. His plantation must have been severely affected and he would have lost a number of his close friends.

In the following month, a start was made with the construction of the city of Kingston. By the end of August 1692, John White had died and Bourden became president of the Council, simply by virtue of being one of the eldest members. As Beeston had already been appointed lieutenant governor, this was a temporary assignment for Bourden until the former speaker arrived in March 1693. Much of his time was taken up with the reconstruction of the island and creating a new settlement. By 20 September 1692, he wrote that 'the island has been in a declining condition for the last seven years, especially the inward part of it, occasioned by the want of white servants' (Fortescue 1899 XII: 710 -1). At the end of September, Bourden decided to entirely abandon Port Royal and move all its inhabitants to the new settlement. The seat of government was also transferred permanently to Spanish Town.

From the minutes of the Council it became clear that the new president ran his affairs with military precision. Strict orders were given, financial matters were speedily dealt with, and defence of the island was maintained as the war with France continued. A good example of Bourden's style was the meeting held on 1 November, where the orders were given 'for H.M.S. Mordaunt to be victual led for a month, for the proceeds of sale of unclaimed goods to be paid to the president for payment of or repair of public buildings in Spanish Town' (Fortescue 1899 XII: 731). In early September, the Queen had asked the Council to provide assistance to the Leewards Islands in the war against France. After a meeting in December, Bourden was asked to respond, on behalf of the Council. He noted that they were 'mightily concerned that we cannot answer her commands. Earthquake and sickness have thinned us much, and we are constantly harassed in remote parts by the French, who have received great accession of strength, and are only twenty-four hours distant' (Fortescue 1899 XII: 751). On the 17 January 1693 Bourden declared martial law and a ship was sent out to the north side of the island to defend it against a possible attack. At the end of the month it returned, and martial law was again suspended. Jamaica was spared a French assault.

On 9 March 1692, William Beeston arrived to take up his position of lieutenant-governor. Bourden would continue to serve on the Council until

his death in 1697. His two daughters married into the local planter elite, while he married late in life. Other relatives disputed the latter and the settlement of his will took some time. He was buried in the cemetery next to the Cathedral of Spanish Town. His gravestone read:

Here lyeth the body of Col.
 John Bourden
 Borne in the City of Colraine
 In the Kingdom of Ireland, in year 1633
 One of His Majesties Counsel of
 Jamaica and some time President.
 A Lover of Justice
 A Loving Husband
 A Faithfull Friend and a Good Master
 Dyed the 18th day of August
 1697

(Cundall 1935: 142)

The earthquake brought the presence of white servants on the island to an abrupt end. Throughout the seventeenth century, the recruiting of new servants had been problematic. Many of the Irish servants that had survived moved to North America and by the end of the century very few were left on the island. The Irish small holders were also severely affected by the earthquake and the aftermath of disease had a devastating effect. Many sold their plots to the larger planters who required more land to intensify their sugar production. Not being able to afford the large kettles or the black slaves to carry out the labour intensive work, the small holders had been confined to growing food for local markets (Dunn 1972: 164). After being bought out by the larger planters, some would have continued to work as overseers while others booked a passage to North America. It was likely that Bourden was one of the planters who bought these small plots up to expand his own plantation.

The life of John Bourden provides us with a new perspective on the Irish in the Caribbean during the seventeenth century. A Protestant Irishman and a product of the Plantation of Ulster, Bourden emigrated to improve himself. As many Irish before and after him, a career in the military was a stepping-stone for colonial success. Bourden's career can be compared to other prominent Irishmen in the region, like the Stapleton's on Montserrat. Contrary to the Irish on the Leeward Islands and Barbados,

Bourden seems to have had little connection with Ireland. However, he was obviously proud of his Irish origins, as his gravestone noted the 'Kingdom of Ireland' as his place of birth. The Irish were a small, but distinct group on Jamaica in the seventeenth century. While most of the Protestant Irish integrated and became part of the elite, their Catholic counterparts faced restrictions. These complexities of Irish life on Jamaica would continue well into the eighteenth century.

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