The
Many-Headed
Hydra

Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the
Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic

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According to newspaper accounts of February 22, 1803, Colonel Edward Marcus Despard, “dressed in boots, a dark brown great coat, his hair unpowdered,” ascended the gallows “with great firmness.” He had played an important role in clandestine efforts in England and Ireland to organize a revolutionary army whose goal was to seize power in London and declare a republic. He now faced hanging and beheading as a traitor. The sheriff had warned that the platform would drop instantly if he said anything “inflammatory or improper.” Facing the assembled twenty thousand with “perfect calmness,” Despard spoke these words:

Fellow Citizens, I come here, as you see, after having served my country,—faithfully, honourably, and usefully served it, for thirty years and upwards, to suffer death upon a scaffold for a crime of which I protest I am not guilty. I solemnly declare that I am no more guilty of it than any of you who may be now hearing me.—But, though his Majesty’s Ministers know as well as I do, that I am not guilty, yet they avail themselves of a legal pretext to destroy a man, because he has been a friend to truth, to liberty, and to justice. [At this, one newspaper reported, “the crowd issued forth loud huzzas.”] Because he has been a friend to the poor and the oppressed. But, Citizens, I hope and trust, notwithstanding my fate, and the fate of those who no doubt will soon follow me, that the principles of freedom, of humanity, and of justice, will finally triumph over falsehood, tyranny, and delusion, and every principle inimical to the interests of the human race.
At this significant phrase—“the human race”—the sheriff admonished him for using such incendiary language. “I have little more to add,” Despard continued, “except to wish you all health, happiness, and freedom, which I have endeavoured, as far as was in my power, to procure for you and for mankind in general.” As his fellow conspirator John MacNamara was brought up to the scaffold, he said to Despard, “I am afraid, Colonel, we have got into a bad situation.” Despard’s answer, the newspapers noted, was characteristic of the man: “There are many better, and some worse.” His last words were, “‘Tis very cold, I think we shall have some rain.” Undoubtedly, he had looked up hoping to behold that little patch of blue which the prisoner calls the sky.1

Despard had been arrested on November 16, 1802, as he attended a meeting of forty workingmen in the Oakley Arms tavern. Those arrested included eight carpenters, five laborers, two shoemakers, two hatters, a stonemason, a clockmaker, a “plaisterer not long from the sea,” and “a man who cuts wood and sells it in penny bundles.” Many of them also
worked as soldiers. These men had organized among common laborers, dockworkers, soldiers, and sailors—especially soldiers stationed at the Tower and “Irishmen who had served on board the Kings Ships & had been used to Cannon.” Several of the Irish laborers “had been united in Ireland,” a phrase showing that the mass terror of killing, torture, and deportation following the Irish Rebellion of 1798 had not extinguished the oath of the United Irish or the brotherhood of affection and communion of rights it expressed. Five thousand workers recently discharged from the wet docks were expected to join the cause: despite a period of intense shipping, they had been rendered either unemployed, as a direct result of hydraulic civil engineering, or homeless, by neighborhood clearances.

The Oakley Arms lay only a few yards from William Blake’s residence, Hercules Buildings in Lambeth on the south side of the river Thames. That same year the epic visionary asked the questions

\[
\text{And did the Countenance Divine} \\
\text{Shine forth upon our clouded hills?} \\
\text{And was Jerusalem builded here} \\
\text{Among these dark Satanic Mills?}
\]

Blake’s “Satanic Mills” were the Albion Mills, the first London steam-powered factory, just down the road from Hercules Buildings. Erected in 1791, this flour mill had been burned to the ground that same year, as part of the anonymous, direct resistance to the industrial revolution. Despard’s conspiracy was a continuation of that resistance, occurring amid widespread machine-breaking in the west of England and martial organizing against starvation and technological redundancy in the north. Blake had left London two years earlier during the famine of 1800. Until then, the visionary and the insurrectionary had walked the same streets.

Despard described the revolutionary force as comprising “Soldiers, Sailors, and Individuals.” They had been recruited in the pubs of three parts of London: in St. Giles’-in-the-Fields, virtually an autonomous zone of the motley proletariat; south of the river, where the soldiers were concentrated; and in the East End river parishes, the neighborhood of sailors and dockers. These men had joined the movement in order “to burst the chain of bondage and slavery” and “to recover some of those liberties which we have lost.” They called Parliament the “Den of
The conspiracy of Edward and Catherine Despard

Thieves” and the government the “Man Eaters.” One thought “Windsor Castle was fit to teach the Gospel and maintain poor people’s Children in.” During their trial, the lord chief justice and presiding judge, Ellenborough, explained that “instead of the ancient limited monarchy of this Realm, its established free and wholesome laws, its approved usages, its useful gradations of rank, its natural and inevitable as well as desirable inequalities of property,” Despard and his fellow revolutionaries had sought “to substitute a wild scheme of impracticable equality.”

Despard himself had claimed that “the people were every where ripe and anxious for the moment of attack.” The plan was therefore to fire upon the king’s carriage with cannon shot as he made his annual way to Parliament, then to seize the Tower and the Bank of England, to master Parliament, and to stop the mail coaches at Piccadilly as a signal for the rest of the country to rise. Despard was expert in ordnance and military strategy and tactics. But the scheme was foiled by the arrests at the Oakley Arms. Fifteen men were indicted for treason, on the grounds that they “did conspire, compass, imagine, and intend” the king’s death. Their convictions were the first instances of the prosecution of imagined crimes. Eleven were found guilty. Although the jury recommended mercy, Despard and six others were executed on February 21, 1803.

Two wings of established authority, chaplain and magistrate, hovered over Despard in his last days. Like a bird of prey, the Reverend Mr. Wirkworth visited Despard to attempt to learn more about the plot, to offer spiritual services, and to urge his “public acknowledgment of God as the supreme governor.” The main purpose was unfulfilled, as Despard said, “Me—no never—I’ll divulge nothing. No, not for all the treasure the King is worth.” To the religious request Despard “replied he had sometimes been at eight different places of worship on the same day, that he believed in a Deity, and that outward forms of worship were useful for political purposes, otherwise he thought the opinions of Churchmen, Dissenters, Quakers, Methodists, Catholics, Savages, or even Atheists, were equally indifferent.” Despard then “offered some criticisms on the words Altar and Ecclesia,” which reminded Wirkworth of Thomas Paine’s Age of Reason. The Reverend “then presented Dr. Dodderidge’s Evidences of Christianity and begged as a favor that he would read it.” Despard “requested that I would not attempt to put shackles on his mind, as on his body (pointing to the iron on his leg) was under so pain-

ful a restraint, and said that he had as much right to ask me to read the book he had in his hand (a treatise on Logic) as I had to ask him to read mine,’ and before I could make a reply Mrs Despard and another lady were introduced, and our conversation ended.”3

The chief magistrate, Sir Richard Ford, wrote to the home secretary the night before the execution to express his concern over the “very considerable Crowds [that] assembled during the Day and this Evening near the Gaol.” He noted the difficulty of procuring workmen to build the scaffold. He mentioned the fears of the gaoler, his own decision to sleep near the prison, and his deployment of one hundred armed soldiers through the night. Since handbills “calling on the People to rise” and to rescue “these unfortunate Men” had been distributed, Ford quite naturally dreaded the possibility of a riot the following day and was prepared to subdue it.4 The public houses were being watched. The lord mayor checked and double-checked the security of Newgate and the prison hulks. Yet amid the continued resistance of the prisoners, threats of armed rescue, and prospects of spontaneous rioting, the chief of police was most troubled by Mrs. Despard. Ford concluded his letter with unconcealed irritation: “Mrs. Despard has been very troublesome, but at last she has gone away.”5 Thus both wings of tyrannical government, chaplain and magistrate, went a-flutter at the presence of Despard’s wife. Who was this woman who so scared the powers-that-be?

Catherine Despard was an African American woman who had accompanied Edward when he sailed from Central America back to London in 1790. British imperial officers often attached themselves in the Caribbean to women of color, but they usually left them behind when they returned to England. Not Despard. Catherine came along but was shunned by her husband’s family as a “poor black woman, who called herself his wife.”6 She was especially active in the prisoners’-rights movement of the 1790s, later linking Edward and other incarcerated revolutionaries with activists outside the prisons. She was refused a last visit on the eve of Despard’s doom and indignantly expressed a “strong opinion with respect to the cause for which her husband was to suffer.” The word cause has two meanings, physical and moral. There was an efficient cause of which the conspiracy was an effect, and there was an ideal to be struggled for, and to both of them Catherine was as committed as her hus-
band. She had worked tirelessly to expose and improve prison conditions, writing and petitioning for the “common necessaries of life”—warmth, fresh air, food, space, books, pen, ink, and paper and access to family, friends, and comrades. Her work as a courier worried the nation’s attorney general and solicitor general, who believed that “so extensive and Voluminous a correspondence” as she carried out of the prison could have no other purpose than publication. They also feared, however, that any attempt to search Catherine as she left the prison would inspire an outcry. So they recommended to the home secretary that Despard’s writings be seized for inspection and censorship before Catherine was permitted to take them.7

Catherine also worked boldly at the highest levels of society and government. She approached Lord Nelson, who had spoken generously at the trial, to make “further application to government.” The nation’s hero, victor over Napoleon at the Nile, now testified on behalf of the nation’s villain, noting that twenty-three years earlier, “we went on the Spanish Main together; we slept many nights together in our clothes upon the ground; we measured the height of the enemies wall together. In all that period of time no man could have shewn more zealous attachment to his Sovereign and his Country, than Colonel Despard did.” Nelson in turn had a word with Lord Minto, the former governor of Corsica, who later wrote, “Mrs. Despard was violently in love with her husband, which makes the last scene of the tragedy affecting indeed. Lord Nelson solicited a pension, or some provision for her, and the Government was well disposed to grant it; but the last act on the scaffold [when the Colonel referred to the human race] may have defeated any chance of indulgence to any member of his family.” Catherine also forfeited the pension due her as the widow of an army officer. She assisted Edward in composing his last words, helping to define the “cause,” or “the principles of freedom, of humanity, and of justice.” She was thus more than just an organizer and courier. “Much of his time,” it was noted of his last days, “was employed in writing, some in reading, and the greater part with Mrs. Despard.”8

The struggles for freedom, humanity, and justice in 1802 were Atlantic: accounts of the conspiracy were quickly published in Paris, Dublin, Edinburgh, and New York. Yet recent historical interpretations have
confined their compass to England, Ireland, and France. They have ignored Catherine Despard, who has remained a shadow (a woman) within a shadow (a black woman) within a shadow (a revolutionary black woman)—or, as Blake wrote in “Visions of the Daughters of Albion” (1793), a poem precisely concerned with the liberation inherent in Anglo-American–African unions, “a solitary shadow wailing on the margin of non-entity.” Sexism and racism have kept her in the shadows. The African American slave experience at the end of the eighteenth century was distinguished, as C. L. R. James noted, not by race but by the collective “extensive cultivation of the soil, which eventually made possible the transition to an industrial and urban society.” The mass cultivators of the soil also provided mass experience in the freedom struggle against slavery, and that experience was conveyed to Albion’s industrial and urban society by folks like Catherine Despard. Our view of the conspiracy must be broadened to include Jamaica, Nicaragua, and Belize, where Despard lived and met Catherine, as well as Haiti and mainland America, where the freedom struggle shook the Atlantic mountains. An Atlantic perspective is likewise needed to understand Despard’s own biography, because he passed his childhood, or the first sixteen years of his life, in Ireland; he spent his manhood, or the next twenty-four years, in the Americas; and he lived out his maturity, or his last twelve years, in London. The union and the conspiracy of Catherine and Edward Marcus Despard may stand for a new cycle of rebellion that began in the 1790s, from which emerged not only the race and class themes in the age of revolution but also a new definition of the human race.

Ireland

Edward Marcus Despard was an Irishman. His conspiracy, as James Connolly correctly insisted, was tied to that of Robert Emmet, also of 1803; and like Emmet, he was an “Irish apostle of a world-wide movement for liberty, equality and fraternity.” Born in 1750 on his family’s estate at Donore, near Mountrath, amid the Slieve Bloom Mountains, in what was then Queen’s County, Ireland (now county Laois), he was the youngest of six brothers. Mountrath lay within the pale of the Tudor plantations. In the early seventeenth century, the area had been settled by
Emanuel Downing, John Winthrop, and other Puritans before they moved across the Atlantic to Massachusetts Bay, selling out to Sir Charles Coote, a ruthless soldier and entrepreneur who aggressively dominated the plantation, against the claims of the Fitzpatrick sept. Despard’s ancestors planted themselves in Mountrath in the 1640s, as part of the
Coote entourage. Despard’s secretary, James Bannantine, claimed in a memoir of 1799 that an ancestor had been an engineer at the Battle of the Boyne. By the middle of the eighteenth century, there were clerks, weavers, joiners, and carpenters in Mountrath bearing the name Despard. Edward’s own immediate family produced soldiers, sheriffs, and priests for the established church.\(^{11}\)

The subtle landscape of Mountrath today hides the woodlands that once covered it, which now are suggested only by townland names: Derrylahan (“the wide oak-wood”), Ross dorragh (“the dark wood”), and Derrynaseera (“the oak-wood of the freeman”). Large enclosed tracts, drained bogs, several rivers, and the forge and mill of proto-industry were all signs of that capitalist mobilization of collective labor that Arthur Young, the agricultural “improver,” likened to the richness of an English scene.\(^{12}\) This landscape, represented on neat eighteenth-century maps of orderly roads and tracts, concealed the squalid hovels and habitations of the dispossessed peasantry and cotters, whose living conditions during this period were even worse than those of West Indian slaves or Russian serfs. Restrictions on the export of Irish cattle to England were lifted in 1759, moving landlords to enclose the commons, destroy the ancient clachan (the unit of communal agriculture), and turn arable land into pasture. The land was well bounded by quick hawthorne hedges, among the most notable of which were those at the Despard estate at Donore, where they were said to be “extremely neat, with saddle copings.” In 1761 agrarian rebels known as the Whiteboys rose against the “improvers.” A cry went up: “Betwixt landlord and rector the very marrow is screwed out of our bones. . . . They have reduced us to such a deplorable state by such grievous oppressions that the poor is turned black in the face, and the skin parched on their back.”\(^{13}\) Nocturnal bands of hundreds of people, dressed in flowing white frocks and white cockades, pulled down the fences enclosing the commons. They were led by fairies and mythic figures such as “Queen Sieve,” who wrote in 1762,

We, levellers and avengers for the wrongs done to the poor, have unanimously assembled to raze walls and ditches that have been made to inclose the commons. Gentlemen now of late have learned to grind the face of the poor so that it is impossible for them to live. They cannot even keep a pig or a hen at their doors. We warn them
not to raise again either walls or ditches in the place of those we destroy, nor even to inquire about the destroyers of them. If they do, their cattle shall be houghed [hamstrung] and their sheep laid open in the fields.\textsuperscript{14}

Despard thus grew up a country of intense social antagonism. Charles Coote complained of the “irreclaimable barbarity and uncivilization of the peasantry”; Arthur Young found the people there more impertinent than elsewhere, and wrote that “stealing is very common.”\textsuperscript{15} During the 1790s, a Ribbon Society (a secret peasant association) was formed in Slieve Bloom; sixteen of its members were eventually hanged. At the same time and in the same region, regiments of loyalists were formed from above, including Mountain Rangers and a regiment raised by Despard’s brother.\textsuperscript{16} Years later, his niece Jane would recall, “Living one Winter in terror, we were driven away by rebel whitefeet or blackfeet; lost all our plate which had been placed in a neighbouring town for safety; the house we lived in set fire to and burnt and my poor father received only £50 damages from the country. We were moved then to Mount Mellick for protection and afterwards to Mountrath.” The Despards were, if not great landlords, landlords still, and part of the military junta that doubled the size of its army between 1792 and 1822. The Despard family was, in short, on the front line of the class struggle between the colonizer and the oppressed.

How was Edward the boy affected by all this? His niece’s memoirs, composed in the 1820s and preserved in the Despard family papers, provide information about him that could be relevant. By nature mild tempered and mild mannered, he was said to have soaked up the contradiction with equanimity. He listened raptly to the fantastic “lies” of the Gaelic storyteller brought in at holidays. He detested the afternoon announcement “Master, the coffee is ready” because it meant he had to read Scriptures aloud to his grandmother.\textsuperscript{17} According to family tradition, even in childhood he loathed the Bible and coffee equally. At the age of eight, “Ned” was placed as page to Countess Hertford, whose husband at the time was lord lieutenant of Ireland, a member of “the proudest and least moral family of any in the British dominions then as now.” Despard was known as a Latin and French scholar and a “great belle letter person.”\textsuperscript{18}
At fifteen, Ned entered the Fiftieth Regiment of the British army. Since Cromwell’s time Ireland had nourished the army and navy with salt beef and butter, and so, too, was it the army’s and navy’s nursery, providing such manpower or cannon fodder as was needed. (In 1798 the “hibernicization” of the British regular army would almost backfire, as some regiments would not be considered “English” enough to be trusted to suppress the rebellion.) All of the Despard brothers joined the British army, except for the eldest, who inherited the family estate. Ned’s formative years in his native land had been passed in a period of renewed and violent class struggle over the common lands and their associated culture. Any seeds of sympathy that may have been sown in him would lie dormant for decades.

Jamaica

In January 1766, Despard’s regiment landed on Jamaica. The young Irishman disembarked into one of the world’s preeminent slave societies, in which a small class of sugar planters and their overseers lived off the labor of some two hundred thousand African slaves. Despard would have seen immediately that this society was based on terror, for he arrived in the aftermath of Tacky’s Revolt. Three more slave revolts soon followed it, one in 1765 and two in 1766; hangings and gibbetings marked the island landscape. Within six years Despard would be promoted to lieutenant and entrusted to help design the shore batteries and fortifications of Kingston and Port Royal, the headquarters of the British navy in the Caribbean. During his near-twenty-year residence in Jamaica, three experiences were decisive: Despard learned to survive in a deadly land; he learned to be a strategic thinker in matters military; and he learned to organize and lead motley crews, multiethnic gangs of laborers.

The health of the English officer in the Caribbean depended on the nursing he received from Jamaican women. “A soldier should be nursed,” declared the senior physician to the British military in Jamaica, Dr. Benjamin Moseley, adding that the drudgery “should be performed by negroes.” J. B. Moreton, a planter of Clarendon Parish, advised the recently arrived English officer or gentleman to find an African American woman as quickly as possible: “If you please and humour her properly,
she will make and mend all your clothes, attend you when sick, and when she can afford it will assist you with any thing in her power.” The informal domestic-service sector of the Caribbean economy, from which the internationally esteemed tradition of Jamaican nursing would grow, did not neatly distinguish at this time among housekeepers, lovers, and nurses. The West Indian boardinghouse was something of a hospital as well as a restaurant and dance hall, as R. R. Madden, the Irish historian, attested after living in such a lodging in Barbados.21 Such establishments, and the relations they assumed, could arouse color prejudice, fear of sexuality, and revolutionary fright even among Anglo reformers such as John Thelwall, who was terrified by the lascivious and riotous dancing, as described in his 1801 novel largely set in Haiti, *The Daughter of Adoption; A Tale of Modern Times*. A Kingston woman might well have adopted the free and easy approach expressed in one Jamaican ballad, which concludes on a note characteristic of the antinomianism of the 1650s. It was to be sung to the air of “What Care I for Mam or Dad”:

*Me know no law, me know no sin,*  
*Me is just what ebba them make me;*  
*This is the way dem bring me in;*  
*So God nor devil take me!*

It is likely that Despard relied on the ministrations of such a woman of African descent, though we do not know for a fact that he met his future wife at this time. Significantly, the women slaves of Jamaica, no less than the men, were freedom fighters: “The head Negro Women about Lucea, even those kept by white men, were concerned” in the slave revolt of Hanover Parish in 1776, for example.22

Despard’s military career depended on military production by men of African descent, enslaved and free, as well as by European soldiers, who were themselves poor and multiethnic—English, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish. This labor had two strategic objects, as set forth in a treatise on the fortification of Jamaica, written in 1783: “1st Security against Insurrections” and “2nd Security against Foreign Invasion.” Thereby, a “General Security of the Settlements against enemies, whether intestine or foreign, is the fundamental principle.”23 It was assumed that any invading force would encourage slave revolt, against which the authorities pur-
sued a policy of dividing the black population, promising freedom to slaves who joined the militia. Five thousand black pioneers were to be instantly mobilized upon alarm. Despard studied cooperation, division, and the relationship between insurrection and invasion.24

“The unfortunate Edward,” his niece wrote years after his death, “was an accomplished draughtsman, mathematician and engineer.”25 Like other engineers, he supervised the labor that built roads and bridges, he conducted sieges, he maintained fortifications, he prepared maps and sketches, and he kept financial accounts.26 In Jamaica, twenty-one locations, with tracery, hornwork, redoubts, or glacis, required attention. “It was here in these material arrangements,” wrote E. K. Brathwaite, referring to the roads, bridges, aqueducts, churches, burial grounds, great houses, and forts erected in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, “that the white contribution to the island’s cultural development lay.” This was architecture, “invented,” said John Ruskin, to make “slaves of its workmen, and sybarites of its inhabitants.” To this we must add its military function, which indeed made possible the other two characteristics.27

Much of the work Despard organized was like the hewing of wood and the drawing of water, for which thousands of people were mobilized. Sappers, miners, and pioneers did the pick-and-shovel work. The sapper executed fieldworks; he built and repaired fortifications. The pioneer worked with others in small squads. The work was carefully coordinated: “A pickaxe breaks the ground, two shovels following, throw the earth towards the scarp, whence two other shovels throw it up the berm; from thence again two shovels throw it upon the profile.” It took seven men to transport as much dirt as one horse. The work included blasting, grubbing, mucking, hacking, bending, thrusting, straightening, and hauling—suggesting why the word fatigue, with its double meaning as “punishment for military misdemeanors” and “physical exhaustion,” entered the English vocabulary at this time.28 (On the other side of the Atlantic, meanwhile, in addition to “Vomiting and Diarrhoea, Shivers and Shakes and Heartaches,” the Gaelic poet in his curses wished upon the English [“Sud An Nidh Ghuidhimsi Saxonig”] “Digging the Drains and Making Ditches.”)29 Despard himself had come to Jamaica from a spade culture, and moreover one in high mobilization in the 1760s as Ireland em-
barked on the most intensive land cultivation of its history. The spade combined many of the functions of the mattock, ax, crowbar, mallet, shovel, and hoe. It was essential to large-scale drainage projects and lazy-bed cultivation alike. Despard and his crews worked on a variety of sites, from marsh to mountain. He shared in the dangers of the work: slip-pages, irregularities, falling boulders, shifting earth, flooding trenches, falling objects, collapsing pilings, and weak shoring.30

During his time on Jamaica, Despard saw his military career advance. His work as an engineer helped to save both Kingston and the island as a whole—as Britain’s headquarters in the Caribbean—from Spanish attack during the American War of Independence. His success was built upon the slavery and terror of island society, as he was part of a privileged class and dependent on the wealthy sugar planters for preferment and promotion, which came to him in 1783 with the award of the rank of colonel in a provincial regiment. With the help of African women, he survived the tropics. He could not have organized the polyglot motley crews had he not developed some sympathy, intellect, and lucidity in forming and coordinating the gangs of workers whose labor was his triumph. In that way, he was creolized.

Nicaragua

Since Despard’s regiment was disabled by disease and at less than full strength in 1776, he was not assigned to join General Howe in the British military campaign against the American colonies, but rather appointed later, in 1779, to be one of the commanding officers in an expedition against the Spanish Main. The goal was to sever North from South America by sending an expedition across Nicaragua to cut the Spanish Empire in half, at the same time connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Governor John Dalling of Jamaica conceived the expedition while dreaming over Thomas Jefferys’s *Atlas of the West Indies*, and he believed that success would produce a “new order of things.” Yet the plan posed problems of logistics and communication. Troops, ships, and provisions had to be mobilized in Jamaica and then transported across a thousand miles of sea, and a base of operations had to be established on an unknown coast. The troops would disembark and reassemble on river
Thomas Jeffreys, The West Indian Atlas; Or, a General Description of the West Indies Taken from Actual Surveys and Observations (1777).
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

craft, carrying materiel and provisions sixty miles upriver, surmounting rapids, shoals, and blind tributaries. They would then lay siege to Fort Inmaculada, which had been built in 1655 to defend against buccaneers. Once in command of all the strong points along the river, the men would build vessels and outfit a fleet for operations in Lake Nicaragua. All of these operations were, moreover, to be carried out in a debilitating milieu of tropical heat and, after May, torrential rains.

The expeditionary force was raised in Kingston in February 1780 under martial law. Despard and other officers would lead several squadrons of soldiers (from the Sixtieth Loyal Americans, the Seventy-ninth or Liverpool Blues, and the Royal American Foot) as well as a larger group of irregulars from Jamaica—the Legion (composed mostly of sailors), the Black Regiment, the Loyal Irish Company, the Royal Batteaux Corps, and a motley contingent of Royal Jamaica volunteers. Lieutenant Governor Archibald Campbell took the farewell salute. The irregulars were
drawn up, he wrote, “in a ragged line, half-clothed and half-drunk, they seemed to possess the true complexion of buccaneers and it would be illiberal to suppose their principles were not in harmony with their faces. A hundred of them were collected together and seemed so volatile and frolicsome, I thought it good policy to order ten guineas for them to be drunk in grog on board their transports and embarked them with three cheers to the great satisfaction of the town of Kingston.”

Twenty years earlier, Molyneux, the first published British authority on amphibious warfare, had described the technical/military potential of the motley crew: “Wonderful things have been done, even with little Boats, with an handful of bold and cunning men.” “We [the British Empire] call ourselves the Neptune of the Sea, without knowing how, in many parties, to sway the trident,”—admitting, in other words, that their command of the “handful of bold and cunning men” was less than perfect.31 He soberly noted that in North America and the West Indies ten such amphibious efforts had succeeded, and thirteen failed. The 1780 expedition fell into two phases. The first, lasting from February to the end of April, the dry season, culminated in the defeat of the garrison at the castle up St. Johns River. The second phase, during the rainy season, was characterized by disease, huge mortality, and, finally, retreat in December. The first was a westward movement upriver, and the second an eastward one, downstream. In the first we see Despard as a bold and daring soldier, in the second as a survivor. He was the first to arrive and the last to leave. Usually shoulder to shoulder with Despard, the young Horatio Nelson here got his boots mired in the mud and fell behind. In the first phase, Despard reconnoitered, he planned the attack, he led the first party and took fire. On April 30, Commanding Officer John Polson wrote to Governor Dalling that “nearly every gun fired was aimed either by Nelson or Despard.” Despard organized parties of sappers to begin mining the ramparts. The siege was successful: the garrison surrendered, and prisoners were taken.32

There was a political economy to the operation: war was work, and Despard commanded. He put the men to work, set their hours, and created a wage and skill hierarchy, offering extra money to those “who really understand their business,” as one of his lieutenants observed. He contended with broken and missing tools, a problem that made it difficult
for the party to blow up the Spanish fort before retreating. He searched for skilled masons, carpenters, sawyers, and most of all boatmen. He was part of a military system in which authority and discipline were maintained by providing food to the soldiers. They were discouraged from providing for themselves, especially in woods that abounded “in game, such as warrus, or wild Hogs, guanas, Ducks, Pigeons, Currasoa Birds, Quams, both as big as Turkeys,” because that would encourage their independence. The officers refused to allow the soldiers to barter, to exchange clothing for provisions, or to hunt in the woods without permission. Troops were soon put on short allowance; then their provisioning fell in arrears. The sick had no fruit or vegetables. By the beginning of June, the “melancholy effects of famine” were beginning to be felt at the castle, and so, too, because of the scarcity and deteriorating conditions, the effects of resistance: pilferage, theft, and desertion. The sailors, soldiers, artificers, boatmen, and laborers had to be continually replaced as the original complement succumbed or ran away. The soldiers who remained at the fort were soon too weak to crawl. At Greytown, downriver, the soldiers were too sick to bury the dead.
The “gray-eyed people,” as the Mosquitos called the English, increasingly depended upon native people for transportation and food. Those who knew the local ecology were a product of three continents: they were American, African, and European. In the seventeenth century, the Mosquito Indians had incorporated European buccaneers and escaped or shipwrecked African slaves into their communities. By the eighteenth, they had become an advanced maritime people with major settlements at Blewfields, Pearl Key Lagoon, Boca del Toro, Corn Island, St. Andres, and Old Providence. Olaudah Equiano spent a year with them; they helped build his house south of Cape Gracias á Dios, “which they did exactly like the Africans, by the joint labor of men, women, and children.” They celebrated with a dryckbot, or drinking bout (a buccaneer custom), “without the least discord in any person in the company, although it was made up of different nations and complexions.” Equiano sailed to Jamaica from London with four Mosquito chiefs, with whom he studied Foxe’s Book of Martyrs, the mammoth sixteenth-century Protestant text of struggle and persecution. Charles Napier Bell grew up among the Mosquitos in the early nineteenth century and learned their lore from an ancient Mandingo woman, a Muslim from the headwaters of the Niger. He described the amplitude of the cockles, the plenty of the seas, the simplicity of plantain cultivation, and how the flowers, the birds, and the cricky jeen supplied all the information of an almanac. The Mosquitos, wrote another observer, “have no interest in the accumulation of property, and therefore do not labour to obtain wealth. They live under the most perfect equality, and hence are not impelled to industry by that spirit of emulation which, in society, leads to great and unwearied exertion. Content with their simple means, they evince no desire to emulate the habits or the occupations of the colonists; but on the contrary, seem to regard their toils and customs with a sense of pity or contempt.”

Whether out of pity, contempt, or ill health of their own, the Mosquitos grew impatient with the St. Johns expedition. Since river transport had depended upon their “spirited exertions and perseverance,” and since their hunting, fishing, and turtling had helped to feed the soldiers, things soon began to fall apart. Alexander Shaw, commissary of provisions, negotiated for their continued work, which they would agree to
only on their own terms: “If any Mosquito men are employed in any la-
borious work it is only to be upon condition they chuse themselves to be
so employed but they are not to be compelled, and are to be paid for their
labour the same as other persons employed in such labour and are to be
at liberty to return either to the Army or to their homes without Molles-
tation.” Officers were also ordered to “take every Step that the Soldiery
have little connection with them [the Indians] in Order to avoid the
possibility of Disgust on their Side.” 39 The Indians nonetheless decided
to go home, and they took their boats with them. Those who returned
to Jamaica, meanwhile, “propagated reports among the lower class of
the white people” that it was unsafe to go to the St. Johns River. The In-
dians “have the highest ideas of freedom,” wrote one of the officers in
April.

Once the Indians had deserted, the expedition relied almost entirely
on the “Black River Negroes”—boatmen from the Mosquito Shore—for
supplies. But when one of the leaders of their contingent fell ill, “almost
all these Negroes deserted, and carried off with them the smallest and
most suitable boats, so that the distresses of the Troops were greatly
heightened, and there remained hardly any other prospect than that of
being obliged to retire.” The desertions continued through May and
June. By September, Despard wrote, the garrison was “so extremely weak
that there are not Men sufficient to keep up the necessary Guards. The
Negroes of the Corps, I have been obliged to keep in the Fort constantly
to prevent their desertion, as well as to have them ready to work when
necessary, & for some time past they have not had much spare time—five
Men deserted one night four of the Volunteers & one of the Legion &
took a Dory with them.” A captain soon reported a strike, as soldiers
made “an absolute Refusal of their Labour.” In July, the resistance from
below had taken an even more serious turn when the slaves on the Mos-
quito Shore revolted and captured the main town on the Black River.

Two thousand soldiers went up the St. Johns River between February
and November, and a hundred returned. Another thousand sailors also
perished. Writing in 1780, Lord George Germain, Britain’s secretary of
war, chastised Governor Dalling, “I lament exceedingly the dreadful
havoc Death has made among the troops.” Unlike sixty-nine other
officers, Nelson and Despard survived—Nelson only because he was car-
rried downriver in a delirium and out of the country, then nursed back to
health by the Afro-Caribbean woman Cuba Cornwallis. Despard remained. In July 1780 the governor of Jamaica indulged himself and his superiors in an apologetics of wishful, xenophobic praise of British regular troops: “It is by the superiority of their discipline we are to reap the greatest advantages. Impressed with this Idea, he flatters himself each Soldier will strive to distinguish himself, and show how superior disciplined and well-bred Troops are to a motley Crew of Indians and Mulattoes.” Despard owed his survival to precisely such a crew.

After the catastrophe of the St. Johns expedition, Dr. Moseley wrote that “the failure of that undertaking has been buried, with many of its kindred, in the silent tomb of government.” Despard’s personal triumph was made possible by his cooperation with the motley crew, including the Mosquito Indians, the black boatmen, and the miners, sappers, and builders with whom he lived and worked for nearly eighteen months. Driven by misplaced duty to imperial arrogance, forced to deny the plenitude of a tropical commons, and surrounded by a slaughter of men whose motley origins alone prevent us accurately from calling it genocide, Despard nonetheless formed an attachment to a people—the Mosquitos—whose knowledge of the commons was seminal, whose origins among buccaneers were held in pride, and whose ideas of freedom were lofty. Was Catherine one of them?

**Belize**

Between Despard’s departure from Nicaragua and his appointment as the Crown’s leading official in British Honduras in 1784, the cycle of rebellion initiated by the motley crew in the 1760s resulted in American independence. Mutinies at sea, revolts on the plantations, and riots in the port cities generated an imperial crisis and a revolutionary movement to answer it, but as we have seen, at war’s end many were excluded from the political settlement. Among these were the thousands of African Americans who had liberated themselves—often, after Dunmore’s Proclamation (1775), by running away to the British army. Military formations such as Leslie’s Black Dragoons and Brown’s Rangers advanced multiracial military organization and anticipated the West Indian regiments of the 1790s. Twenty thousand African Americans were carried out of North America after 1782, to Canada, the West Indies, Central America,
England, and Africa. The people in diaspora expressed their journey, or exodus, in a discourse of deliverance that owed much to the renewal of liberation theology of the English Revolution, newly fortified by African American preachers such as Sambo Scriven, who traveled to the Bahamas, George Liele, who went to Jamaica, and John Marrant, who preached in London and Nova Scotia. Aboard men-of-war, in the harbors and ports of the northern Atlantic, in prisons afloat and ashore, they carried the message of jubilee as they searched for the New Jerusalem. This movement of people and ideas would come to affect Despard in Belize.

Belize was a dense tropical forest protected by the largest coral barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere. Even on Despard’s and his associate David Lamb’s maps, the boundaries of private property showed as unconvincing geometric lines amid the prolific rendering of forest. For nearly two hundred years the region had been home to Indian, African, and European mariners, renegades, and castaways, including buccaneers, pirates, and sailors, millenarian dissidents from the former Mayan milpas, transported Jacobite rebels from the Fifteen and the Forty-Five, survivors of wrecked slave ships, and transported Jamaican rebels. They cut logwood in the mangrove swamps, often at night, by the light of pitch-pine torches, to escape the heat. They sold the logwood to Jamaican traders, who in turn shipped it to Europe, where it was used as a mordant in dyeing textiles. They lived “generally in common,” for whenever they used up a “stock of provisions & Liquors, they go to live with their neighbors.” Although they appeared to outsiders to be lawless, they in fact had “certain rules of their own making,” wrote the merchant encyclopedist Postlethwayt. Belize was a landed extension of hydrarchy in compound with Mayan milpas: it provided mankind with an example of collective self-reliance in a commons, self-government without the principle of hierarchy, and multiethnic solidarity, which had already shaped local historical consciousness by the time Despard arrived and which was to remain so powerful that when Lewis Henry Morgan visited, years later, he would coin the expression “primitive communism” to describe it.

By the time Despard landed there in 1786, much of the Belize littoral had been transformed into private property. The Treaty of Paris had concluded the Seven Years’ War in 1763, giving British settlers more secure land tenure and opening the way to mahogany cutting. Wealthier set-
tlers had moved to the region, bringing with them slaves and the aggressive cupidity of a new mode of production. The magnificent trees were felled by axmen who belonged to slave gangs of cattle drovers, rafters, teamsters, cooks, providers. The mahogany was sold to European furnishers, of whom Thomas Chippendale was merely the most enterprising. His publication of The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker’s Director (1754), with its four hundred designs and 160 folio copper plates, represented a step toward standardization, moving the industry from handicraft production to manufacture. The European ruling class now ate off of mahogany tables, clothed itself from mahogany dressers, gazed upon itself in mahogany-framed mirrors, wrote letters on mahogany écritoires, sang in choir stalls of mahogany, and so on. Meanwhile, Admiral William Burnaby had arrived with naval warships in Belize in 1765 to establish a formal legal code and to announce that land would no longer be held in common. The same year brought the first slave revolt; others followed in 1768 and 1773. By 1780, slaves outnumbered the free by six to one. Fifteen “Baymen,” as the ambitious planters termed themselves, had engrossed all mahogany production.47

Despard’s assignment there in 1786 coincided with a new agreement between Britain and Spain, called the Convention of London, whose implementation would trigger armed conflict in Belize over land and labor and decisively alter the colonel’s life. The Convention required Britain to evacuate more than two thousand of its settlers from the Mosquito Shore to Belize in exchange for new mahogany-cutting rights there. In February 1787, 514 immigrants arrived from the Mosquito Shore. Most of them, Despard observed, were “indigent people of colour” of the American exodus. In May another 1,740 people joined the suddenly crowded settlement. Despard was charged with providing subsistence for the new settlers while integrating them into the colony.48 Who were these people who came to the bay to be “Hewers of Wood and the Drawers of Water”?49 In the first group were members of the Loyal American Rangers, who had been recruited in New York among deserters and prisoners of the Continental Army in 1780 and posted to Jamaica in 1781, when Despard “had the honor of commanding most of them” in the routing of the Spanish on the Black River in 1782.

While treaty arrangements with Spain forbade the cultivation of food, in practice this prohibition was impossible to enforce. Fishing and tur-
the many-headed hydra

tling provided the staple diet of the Mayas, the Mosquitos, and the buccaneers, but not so the settlers; as their numbers grew, the rapacious among them began to privatize the commons, and the colony thus became increasingly dependent on food imports from North America. In order to ensure subsistence for the “poorer sort of people,” Despard allowed the cultivation of plantains, yams, corn, pineapples, and melons, disregarding the terms of the treaty. He set aside certain areas “to be enjoyed in common by all the settlers” and strengthened his alliance with the people who knew the local ecology. He waged a bitter struggle against American merchants who charged exorbitant prices for foodstuffs, thereby “keeping the people poor and totally dependent upon them.” When, in 1788, such merchants violated trading regulations, he did not hesitate to impound and even to sell their vessels. 50

Despard also had to decide how the new settlers would “get the means of subsistence by their labor and industry.” His allocation of land from the newly ceded territory caused the established mahogany men to howl in protest. Earlier, the Baymen had opposed his decision to permit the landing of a ship of convicts, suspected his motives in granting manumission from slavery, and felt insulted when he showed leniency to a Negro charged with the murder of a white man. Now Despard ignored their pressure and proposed to hand out land by lottery, which he deemed the “most equal and impartial mode of distribution.” The Baymen responded angrily that this would give the “lowest Mulatto or free Negro” an “equal chance” with the wealthiest. One of them could not understand how “a person of his extensive property should be placed on a footing with fellows of the lowest class and have no more land allowed him than . . . a fellow as Able Tayler (this is a man of Collour).” The lottery, they complained, would distribute land “without any distinction of Age, Sex, Character, Respectability, Property, or Colour.” Despard, they charged, was no respecter of persons: he insisted “that he cannot & will not know any distinction between these very different classes of men.” He assigned lots to all classes and colors of men as well as to sixteen women. 51

Tensions escalated when a “free man of Colour,” Joshua Jones, drew town lot number 69 and, on Despard’s authority, tore down the cookhouse of a wealthy settler that had been built on the land. Jones was arrested by magistrates representing the Baymen and clapped into jail.
Soon a “few white people of the very lowest class, a number of Mustees, Mulattos, and Free negroes,” began drumming, “playing the Gambia,” and “running about the streets and assembling under arms,” threatening to free Jones. Despard intervened on their side and demanded Jones’s release. It was one of those flashpoints of history that illuminate an epoch. The Baymen expressed a doctrine of racial supremacy combined with class superiority, arguing that the “mode of distribution adopted by the Superintendent, was equally unjust and unpoltic in putting Negroes and Mulattoes (a set of persons who, in all the West India Islands, were considered in a very inferior light to the whole Inhabitants) upon a footing with Gentlemen and Mahogany Cutters, who were the supporters of the Country.” Maintaining an egalitarian view that was nonetheless still consistent with the mixed constitution of king and Parliament, Despard replied that “the legislative powers of these Islands made, it is true, some distinctions between white people and Negroes and mulattoes; but that there being no legislature in this Country, it must be governed by the law of England, which knows no such distinction, that even in those parts of the British Colonies where any such distinctions took place, it by no means did so in the distribution of the King’s land; and that these people of colour were as much entitled to places to live as the first Mahogany Cutters in the Country.”

The Baymen continued to assault the new claimants, prompting the “people of colour” to petition in 1787 against their exclusion from land by reason of race:

We your Petitioners the Inhabitants of the Mosquito Shore humbly sheweth that the many circumstances that immediately occur to us gives the most assured reason to expect that it will be really impossible for us to procure a livelihood in this Country, as we are not allowed the privileges of British subjects, and as Colored persons treated with the utmost disrespect, even threatened of being deprived of the Laws and privileges of this Country in case we do not sign and agree to a certain resolution made by a Committee appointed by persons for that purpose, which are of opinion is contrary to the proposals of Colonel Despard Superintendent of this Country and to any British Constitution whatever.

Among those signing this petition was Joshua Jones.

In the same year, Despard stood for election as magistrate. He won
with more than 80 percent of the vote. His enemies claimed that some of the ballots had been cast by “ignorant turtlers” and “men of colour, possessing no species of property or any fixed residence.” Robert White, the agent of the Baymen, wrote to Lord Sydney in London in 1788 that Despard’s lottery “breaks into pieces all the Links of Society, and destroys all Order, Rank, and Government”; to this Despard responded by noting the partiality of the Baymen’s laws to rich people. 53 Their law of naturalization excluded people of color, seeking to prevent them from independent subsistence and to force them to become servants or slaves. By September 1789 the Baymen’s complaints had expanded to include the full chorus of the North Atlantic bourgeoisie. Lord Grenville, Britain’s secretary of state, announced in October of that year that Despard had been suspended from office.

Race was not the only issue here: how the classes were constituted in relation to subsistence and to the commons was also in question, and inherent in that was the matter of reproduction. In the slave and military society of plantation Jamaica, reproduction was made possible by the creolized group living and nursing of the boardinghouse. In the Nicaraguan expedition of 1780, it had depended on the rigid command of scarcity in the midst of fecundity, which had led inevitably to catastrophe. Only in Belize did Despard attempt a third solution: accommodation with the commons and union with the motley crew. But Despard did not so much organize a motley crew as he was organized by one. While it is conceivable that Despard met Catherine in either Jamaica or Nicaragua, it is perhaps more likely that they formed their alliance in Belize. Having arrived in the settlement unmarried, Edward had a wife and a son by the time he sailed back to England in April 1790. 54 Our story, then, is of a woman of the African American revolutionary diaspora who married an Irish officer amid the egalitarian modification of a Central American commons, only to be defeated by a commercial concupiscence of empire that they now sought to face squarely in the midst of revolution.

The Human Race

Edward and Catherine Despard reached London in the spring of 1790, one year after the storming of the Bastille and the beginning of the French Revolution, and one year before the stormy night of voodoo in
the Bois Caiman that would launch the Haitian Revolution. They arrived to find a movement afoot in England to abolish slavery. The middle-class educational program about West Indian slavery promoted a sympathetic, if false, impression. Josiah Wedgwood’s seal of the kneeling Negro, captioned “Am I not a Man and a Brother?” (1787), presented a posture of individual supplication, while the Plymouth Committee’s image of the plan of a slave ship (1788) conveyed a sense of reiterated passivity (see page 155). Edward and Catherine knew the truth, which would become obvious to others only after the Haitian Revolution. The Despards would use this truth as they organized in London “to burst the chain of bondage and slavery,” as they advocated the “principles of freedom, of humanity, and of justice,” and as they developed their conception of the “human race.”

In England, Edward and Catherine found a country where workers had embraced the cause of abolition. Seven hundred sixty-nine Sheffield cutlers had petitioned Parliament in 1789 against the efforts of the pro-slavery lobby: “The cutlery wares made by the freemen . . . being sent in considerable quantities to the Coast of Africa, and disposed of, in part, as the price of Slaves—your Petitioners may be supposed to be prejudiced in their interests if the said trade in Slaves should be abolished. But your petitioners having always understood that the natives of Africa”—and here they would have remembered Olaudah Equiano’s talks with them as he lectured on the abolition circuit—“have the greatest aversion to foreign Slavery.” Claiming to “consider the case of the nations of Africa as their own,” and putting principle before material interest, the cutlers took an unusual public stand against slavery, something no English workers had done in almost a century and a half. Joseph Mather, the poetical annalist of proletarian Sheffield, sang,

As negroes in Virginia,
In Maryland or Guinea,
Like them I must continue—
   To be both bought and sold.
While negro ships are filling
I ne’er can save one shilling,
And must, which is more killing,
   A pauper die when old.
Sheffield was a steel town, manufacturing the sickles and scythes of harvest, the scissors and razors of the export markets, and the pike, implement of the people’s war. The secretary of the workers’ organization, the Sheffield Constitutional Society (formed in 1791), explained its purpose: “To enlighten the people, to show the people the reason, the ground of all their complaints and sufferings; when a man works for thirteen or fourteen hours of the day, the week through, and is not able to maintain his family; that is what I understand of it; to show the people the ground of this; why they were not able.” The Constitutional Society also declared itself against slavery, much like the London Corresponding Society, which, as we shall later see, was founded early in 1792 in discussion of “having all things in common” and committed to equality among all, whether “black or white, high or low, rich or poor.”

The unity of race and class concerns, however, soon began to fragment. When the Corresponding Society stepped politely into the civic realm on April 2, 1792, its official statement made no mention of slavery, the slave trade, or the commons—and this on the very day of the “April Compromise,” when Parliament agreed to abolish the slave trade, but only “gradually”! By August 1792, the L.C.S. was defining its constituency and its aims among inhabitants of Great Britain: “Fellow Citizens, Of every rank and every situation in life, Rich, Poor, High or Low, we address you all as our Brethren.” 55 No more “black or white” here: equality of race had disappeared from the society’s agenda. What had happened? The answer, in a word, is Haiti. In April 1792, in France, the assembly decreed full political rights for people of color, while in Haiti Hyacinth was leading fearless slaves to besiege Port-au-Prince, and Toussaint L’Ouverture had begun to organize degraded slaves into an independent military force of freedom fighters that would defeat the armies of three European empires over the next decade. Similarly, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, expelled from the white church, founded their own African Church in Philadelphia in order to lift up former slaves whose experiences had been abject—to transform, as they put it, thorns into grapes and thistles into figs. 56 Race had thus become a tricky and, for many, in England, a threatening subject, one that the leadership of the L.C.S. now preferred to avoid.

In this confused and rapidly changing situation, what could Edward
and Catherine Despard contribute? We have seen that during his last days in prison Edward would be frequently and intensively communicating with Catherine, even under the eagle eye of power. We see their conspiracy as a “breathing together” in conversation, which included the wording of the speech he would give from the scaffold (should he say “the human race”?) and the conveyance of information, if not instructions, to co-conspirators in several lands. Did they anticipate a coup d’état (Napoleon’s 18 Brumaire had been in 1799), or a diversion for a French landing in Ireland, or an insurrection to provoke a general rising, or an extension of the Atlantic slave revolts? To answer these questions, we must first consider the circumstances of the conspiracy, or the social forces from which it sprang and to which it appealed: this is the thèse de circonstance. Then we must explore the ideas and the ideals that motivated the conspirators: that is the thèse de complot.

Slaves, industrial workers, sailors and dockworkers, and the Irish would provide the main insurgent force behind the conspiracy of the Despards. In the international conjuncture of 1800–1803, slaves were especially active. In 1800, the black Eighth West India Regiment mutinied in Dominica, slaves plotted on the island of Tobago, and Gabriel organized a slave insurrection in Richmond, Virginia, in which French revolutionaries and perhaps United Irishmen were implicated. A New York property holder wrote that year, “If we will keep a monster in our country, we must keep him in chains”; in Jamaica, the governor contemplated genocide. Slaves fought against the expeditionary army under Leclerc (Napoleon’s son-in-law), which invaded Haiti in March 1802, and they rioted against the resumption of slavery in Guadeloupe. In the summer of 1802, many who felt betrayed by their leadership (Toussaint had been captured; Dessalines was still fighting for the French) rose in rebellious combinations of soldiers, peasants, maroons, dockers, and sailors that by February 1803 captured several cities. That same month, a jailbreak by African Americans, coupled with a rash of urban arson, nearly destroyed York, Pennsylvania. Cases heard at the Old Bailey in London in late 1802 involved several black sailors whose transatlantic experience had included sojourns in Providence, New York, Charleston, Kingston, Bridgetown, and Belize City. Such men brought news of what Herbert Aptheker called a decade-long wave of slave plots and uprisings in the
the many-headed hydra

United States, which culminated in 1802. Arthur, a black rebel in Virginia, appealed in that year to “both black and white which is the common man or poor white people, mulattoes will join with me to help free country.”58

A second force was the lost commoners of England, those who sought through the Despards’ conspiracy to rise against the “Den of Thieves” (Parliament) and the “Man-eaters” (the government) and “to recover some of those liberties we have lost.” The Board of Agriculture had advocated the abolition of the commons in 1795. Thomas Malthus considered the woodland ecology to be an obstacle to civilization: the woods gave cover to the barbarians, the “hydra-headed monster” that had invaded and destroyed Rome. Hence, to abolish the commons was to slay the hydra, but this was no easy task. Expropriation often seemed to mobilize the disenfranchised. Thomas Spence made the point with Atlantic range: “Abroad and at Home, in America, France, and in our own Fleets, we have seen enough of public spirit . . . to accomplish Schemes of infinitely greater difficulty. . . . The People have only to say ‘Let the Land be ours and it will be so.” Despard himself had witnessed violent enclosure and resistance in Ireland and had angered factions by his redistribution of land in Belize.59

A substantial number of the men arrested with Despard at the Oakley Arms tavern in November 1802 were craftsmen, whose degradation in the 1790s was manifested in increased hours of employment, fewer holidays, and intensified labor across the whole of their collective working day. These were accomplished by the introduction of machinery and by policing. The cotton gin and the steam engine, introduced in the 1790s, gave the plantation and the factory their lease on life by demonstrating that machines, far from abridging labor, actually increased unpaid work. In 1802, wage cuts caused two thousand Thames shipbuilders to “down” their tools. Then the croppers struck in Yorkshire, and the “spirit of Levelling” in Wiltshire was joined to nocturnal attacks upon textile machinery.60 Common rights were criminalized, the workers divided. In the winter of 1802–3, the struggle to retain customary income on the London docks was bitter. Colquhoun, a Scots merchant, Jamaican planter, and founder of the London police, advocated enclosure of the docks and the construction of inland waterways. His system of preventive policing
attacked the customary rights of the “aquatic labourers,” or, as he explained, “the hydra in all the different forms it assumed.”\textsuperscript{61} To slay the hydra was thus to criminalize customary income.

Despard considered sailors and dockworkers, the third main group, to be especially important to his plan to capture London. There were, after all, some one hundred thousand of them, many Irish and African, and they had been rebellious for years. The mutiny on H.M.S. \textit{Bounty} took place on a planetary voyage of 1789 to collect food (breadfruit) from the Pacific to feed people imported from Africa who slaved on West Indian plantations, where they made sugar to provide empty calories to the proletarians in Europe. In 1797, H.M.S. \textit{Hermione} suffered its own mutiny off the coast of Haiti, led by a Belfast republican and a New York African American. At the Nore and Spithead in May and June 1797, when dozens of ships mutinied in home waters, the imperial edifice shook but did not topple, though the Bank was forced to suspend gold payments. Hundreds were court-martialed, but thereafter sixteen ounces, not the pursuer’s fourteen, comprised the pound. In January 1802 thirteen mutineers of Admiral Campbell’s squadron were tried and sentenced to death; in the same month, sixteen others were executed at Portsmouth. On Christmas Eve, 1802, several ships in Gibraltar mutinied. At the end of January 1803, Yarmouth sailors struck.

Despard’s future fellow prisoner Thomas Spence wrote a commonist plan, \textit{The Marine Republic} (1794), addressed specifically to his audience among the aquatic laborers. Spence also serialized a seventeenth-century account of Masaniello’s Revolt, whose conclusion he modified to emphasize the autonomous power of an “injured and exasperated people.”\textsuperscript{62}

Organizing continued on the waterfront even in the face of repression: “Be no longer \textit{Slaves},” enjoined a printed card passed silently from calloused hand to calloused hand. The L.C.S. membership card of 1797 depicted a cartoon of a man’s being escorted to a boat, with a ship anchored in the distance. “Come along thou black Lubber,” says the bully sailor. “O Heavens! can Christians traffic in human Blood?” is the astonished reply.\textsuperscript{63} Despard was known among the deckhands and dockers as a “person who had been a Governor somewhere and whose Men had been mutinous and he would not punish them, so was turned out of his place.”\textsuperscript{64}
Fourth were the Irish. The Despards’ conspiracy was in one sense a continuation of the Irish Rebellion and its expansion into England, as Irish sailors, soldiers, and laborers figured centrally in it. Slavery and race became a common cause: a parade of Belfast reformers in 1790 featured an antislavery banner depicting a “Negro boy, well-dressed and holding high the cap of liberty.” The United Irish song book *Paddy’s Resource* (1795) included “The Captive Negro” and “The Negro’s Complaint.” In 1795, Irish regiments mutinied against service in the West Indies. Thomas Russell inveighed against slavery and landlordism in his *Address to the People of Ireland* (1796). Blunt and didactic, the United Irishman had as his goal to politicize popular culture rather than to valorize it. Still, this worked harmoniously with Gaelic, the language of the oldest traditions of history from below, in which prophecy, millenarianism, and the world turned upside down helped to form *saoirse*. The United Irish walked and walked. To boxing matches, hurling games, funerals, and collective potato diggings they carried the messages found in *Christ in Triumph Coming to Judgment* (1795), *The Cry of the Poor for Bread*.
(1796), and *The Poor Man’s Catechism* (1798). This was a “communal store of knowledge, accessible to all,” even to vagabonds such as Vladimir and Estragon *en attendant Godot:* “You have been told that politics is a subject upon which you should never think: that to the rich and great men of the country you should give up your judgement in the business of government. . . . Who gives this advice? . . . The men who profit by your ignorance and inattention. . . . Why not think of politics? Think of [it] seriously; think of your rulers; think of republics; think of kings.”

After the rebellion of 1798, the slaughter was vast: thirty thousand, far in excess of the number dead in Robespierre’s Terror. A large number of United Irish, estimated Castlereagh, were transported to Jamaica, where they were drafted into the regiments: “As soon as they got arms into their hands they deserted, and fled into the mountains, where they have been joined by large bodies of the natives and such of the French as were in the island. There have already been some engagements between this part and the King’s troops: several have been killed and wounded on both sides.”

William Cobbett reported in 1798 the belief that in Virginia and the Carolinas, “some of the free negroes have already been admitted into the conspiracy of the United Irishmen.” These latter were conscious that one reason for their defeat in Ireland had been their failure to seize the capital, Dublin. Despard, who in Jamaica had studied the relationship between internal insurrection and external attack, applied the same strategic thinking to London at a moment when invasion by revolutionary France loomed large. But London was saturated with armed shopkeepers—the Volunteers—a fact that Despard acknowledged by saying he needed fifteen hundred men to take the city but fifty thousand to hold it. A leader of buccaneers, husband to an African American, friend to Central American Indians, and an officer of the army of the United Irish, Despard put his hand to the helm of a revolutionary vessel manned by an Atlantean crew.

How had Despard met the motley crew? Some contacts he had made during his travels, and others through political organizations such as the United Irishmen and the L.C.S. He was active in street demonstrations—for example, in 1795 he was “among the Mob that was breaking Mr Pitt’s Windows” at 10 Downing Street, chanting “No war, No Pitt, Cheap Bread.” Others he met in the taverns where the plans for the up-
rising were laid. But probably the most important meeting place of insurrectionists was the prison, the hydra’s lair in which Despard spent much of the decade of the 1790s. Between 1792 and 1794, he was immured in King’s Bench Prison for debt. He was detained for sixteen months in Cold Bath Fields in 1798 after the suspension of habeas corpus. In 1799 he was removed to Shrewsbury Gaol. In 1801, he was incarcerated in the Tower and then later in the Tothill Fields Bridewell. While he “was confined so long in the Bastille,” he met mutinous soldiers and sailors, Spenceans, artisans, Jacobins, and democrats. Despard was in King’s Bench when Joseph Gerrard collected signatures on a petition supporting universal manhood suffrage. Several mutineers from the Nore were locked up with Despard in Cold Bath Fields Prison; in fact, seven mutineers had earlier escaped from the cell he occupied. Lord George Gordon paid for dinners in Newgate attended by “all ranks . . . the jew and gentile, the legislator and the labouring mechanic, the officer and soldier, all shared alike.” Included in these occasions was James Ridgway, who published books and pamphlets on abolitionism, Ireland, and the rights of women, as well as Bannantine’s memoir of Despard in 1799. Of the boom in building prisons, Burke gloated, “We have rebuilt Newgate and
tenanted the mansion.” In contrast, Lord George Gordon, who was compared to Masaniello, wrote, “We have reason to cry aloud from our dungeons and prison-ships, in defense of our lives and liberties, in this advanced period of the world.” Despard heard the cries and got to know the criers.

Catherine Despard heard the cries, too. She worked with the wives and friends of the habeas corpus prisoners and fought to improve the conditions that her husband and many others suffered in prison. She organized a defense campaign in Parliament and in the newspapers. In December 1802, prisoners’ wives wrote to Home Secretary Pelham, “By the Command of our Husbands we Write to Petition your Lordship that their Grievances may be redressed. They being confin’d in Separate Cells & Nearly dead with Cold & Hunger we pray your Lordship that their Irons being heavy Double & exceeding Grievous may be taken off or Lightened.” Conditions were cruel, as revealed by John Herron’s suit in 1801 against Thomas Aris, warden of King’s Bench Prison: Herron’s cell measured six by eight feet; he was not provided with a chamber pot; “the dirt” was removed from his cell only once a week; he was kept on a diet of fourteen ounces of bread and two draughts of water “through the spout of a tin can.”

What were the ideas and ideals of the Despards’ conspiracy? When Judge Ellenborough summarized the state’s case in 1803, he chastised Despard for his “wild scheme of impracticable equality,” echoing the Baymen’s accusation in 1789 that he held the “wild and Levelling principle of Universal Equality.” The suggestion that Despard’s ideas were utopian (in the sense that utopia = no place) was, however, false. It would be more accurate to say that they arose from many places; they were polytopian. The conception of freedom emphasized in Despard’s gallows speech owed something to those who had the “highest ideas of freedom”: the Mosquito Indians of the Nicaraguan coast. His notion of equality owed something to the struggles of the motley crew in the American Revolution. His commitment to justice owed something to the United Irishmen. In another version of his gallows speech, Despard was reported to have said, “Although I shall not live to experience the blessings of the godlike change, be assured, Citizens, that the period will come, and that speedily, when the glorious cause of Liberty shall effectually triumph.”
He thus compared the revolutionary struggle of the human race with divine agency. Although averse to the Bible as a child, Despard had since studied theology and sought out other seekers of such truth. Upon his return to London, he had met the shoemaker and rabbi David Levi in Finsbury and immediately commenced millenarian biblical discussion with this well-known scholar and advocate of jubilee.\(^{79}\)

Despard’s interest in comparative religion would have offended William Hamilton Reid, who in 1800 wrote *The Rise and Dissolution of the Infidel Societies in this Metropolis*, a work of heresiography comparable to Thomas Edwards’s *Gangraena* of 1646. Worried about plebeian clubs of atheists and deists, as well as millenarians and antinomians, Reid sounded the alarm, “This hydra had too many heads to be crushed at once.” The ideas of these heterodox thinkers of Reid’s nightmares went back to the English Revolution a century and a half earlier: they discredited established church authority; they made the human form divine (“The whole godhead is circumscribed in the person of Jesus Christ,” as Muggleton put it); and they did not respect persons, allowing apprentices to preach in the 1790s as in the 1640s. The theological sign of seventeenth-century antinomianism was the “everlasting gospel,” which was defined this way: “That by Christ’s death, all the sins of all men in the world, Turks, Pagans, as well as Christians committed against the moral Law and the first covenant, are actually pardoned and forgiven, and this is the everlasting gospel.”\(^{80}\) African American refugees preached this “everlasting gospel” in London after 1783. One such was John Jea, a sea-cook and preacher from Old Calabar (1773), who married an Irishwoman and spread the word in New York, Cork, Liverpool, and Manchester. Richard Brothers prophesied in 1794, “All shall be as one people . . . The Christian, the Turk, and the Pagan.” William Blake wrote in his *Songs of Innocence* (1789):

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{And all must love the human form} \\
&\text{In heathen, turk, or jew.} \\
&\text{Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell} \\
&\text{There God is dwelling too.}
\end{align*}
\]

Blake had participated in the Gordon Riots in 1780, when Newgate was besieged under the leadership of former American slaves, and he knew
Ottobah Cugoano, a London servant originally from the Gold Coast who had slaved in Grenada.

Cugoano was an abolitionist, an experienced preacher and writer, a powerful voice of freedom, and a devout believer in the “everlasting gospel.” Written in the copious style of prophetic condemnation, his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787 and 1791) referred to the many shades of the rainbow, rather than to different human races. Cugoano welcomed the “world turned upside down”; he defended American Indians; he opposed the expansion of the death penalty; he insisted that Africans were as “free-born” as English; he repeatedly referred to his “fellow creatures.” He believed that avarice, stock-jobbing, and private property tended to slavery. Further, he preached that “church signifies an assembly of people; but a building of wood, brick or stone, where the people meet together, is generally called so; and should the people be frightened away by the many abominable dead carcases which they meet with, they should follow the multitudes to the fields, to the valleys, to the mountains, to the islands, to the rivers, and to the ships.”

Despard followed the people to exactly these places, and after he planned the “godlike change” he anticipated in his last speech, the people followed him to the gallows atop Horsemonger Lane Gaol. This was their conception of “church,” appropriate to their conception of the “human race.”

Despard’s idea of the human race took much of its power from its opposition to a contrary conception of race that had emerged in the 1790s. The Orange Order had been formed in Ireland as a terrorist church-and-king mob, creating religious bigotry. Dundas had organized massive expeditions to the West Indies between 1795 and 1797 to protect and secure British interests in slavery; he had succeeded in these goals, as “commerce, finance, and seapower . . . were triumphantly secured,” but only at the price of one hundred thousand British casualties. The expeditions thus touched, directly or indirectly, a high proportion of the population of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, as for every casualty, grieving relations or friends might pause to wonder what purpose his death had served. John Reeves, head of the Alien Office and of the Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, used the experience to impart lessons of racism, while Han-
nah More’s “cheap repository tracts” taught condescension, dumbing down, and racial stereotypes:

Tom: Pooh! I want freedom and happiness the same as they have got it in France.
Jack: What, Tom, we imitate them? . . . Why, I’d sooner go to the Negers to get learning, or to the Turks to get religion, than to the French for freedom and happiness.

The Association in Saint Anne’s Parish (Westminster) kept in 1794 a house-to-house register that noted the “complexion, age, employment, &c. of lodgers and strangers.” Elizabeth Hamilton wrote in her novel *Memoirs of a Modern Philosopher* (1800) that radicals believed that new, unthought-of revolutionary energies belonged to the Hottentots.

After each major uprising, the racist doctrine of white supremacy took another step in its insidious evolution. After Tacky’s Revolt (1760), Edward Long lavished pages of attention in his *History of Jamaica* (1774) to what Joan Dayan calls “surreal precision in human reduction.” After the American Revolution, Samuel Smith helped to reconfigure racism in *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure of the Human Species* (1787). Racial investigations were conducted with scientific pretension, and human beings analyzed by logic-chopping speciation, classification, and racialization. In April 1794, a Manchester physician named Charles White, who had heard John Hunter lecture on the differential mortality rates of the St. Johns expedition, measured various body parts of Africans at the Liverpool lunatic hospital. He then examined the breasts of twenty women at the Manchester lying-in hospital, conjoining lascivious expression with racial superiority. White gave the doctrine of white supremacy “scientific” legitimacy in a lecture of his own in 1795, wherein he concluded that black people belonged to a different gradation of the human race.

From Price’s celebrated sermon of 1790 affirming the right to cashier governors, to Edmund Burke’s powerful rhetorical riposte in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* of 1791 (in which he labeled the people a “swinish multitude”), to Tom Paine’s equally rhetorical, if plainer, *Rights of Man*, public debate seemed to be largely “an English agitation . . . for an English democracy,” as E. P. Thompson emphasized. It seemed to re-
main so as it was developed further in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Thelwall’s *The Rights of Nature* (1796), and Spence’s *The Rights of Infants* (1796). Yet there were also other important voices. Wolfe Tone published *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* in 1791; Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* first appeared in 1789 and went through nine English editions over the next five years; and C. F. Volney’s *The Ruins; Or, Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires* became available in English and Welsh translations in 1792.

What was most vigorous in the debate did not come from any single national experience, English or otherwise. Much came from outsiders, and in this Edward and Catherine Despard were not alone in the cosmopolitan shaping of revolutionary ideals. In 1789 Joseph Brand, the Iroquois leader, provided Edward Fitzgerald, the Irish patriot, with a lesson in the brotherhood of man as they journeyed together through the forests of the Great Lakes; Fitzgerald had served in the West Indies after the Battle of Eutaw Springs (1780), in which his life had been saved by an African American named Tony Small. John Oswald (1760–1793) wrote for the *Universal Patriot*. At Joanna Isle in the Mozambique Passage, an Abyssinian oracle informed him that “Englishman, Joannaman, were all one brother.” In 1791, as a result of a spiritual experience that she expressed as “Room, Room, Room, in the many Mansions of eternal glory for Thee and for everyone,” Jemima Wilkinson changed her name to “Universal Friend.” On Seneca Lake in 1791 at a gathering of the Council of the Iroquois Six Nations, she preached on “Hath Not God Created Us All?” Questions on one side of the Atlantic raised very similar questions on the other. “Which Character is the most truly amiable, the Friend—the Patriot—or, the Citizen of the World?” debated the speakers at Coachmakers Hall in 1790. The Despards helped to advance a “universalism” from below.

Other contributors included Lord George Gordon, who discussed slavery as a midshipman in 1772 with the governor of Jamaica. Joseph Gerrard, the Scottish delegate to the convention of 1792 and himself a political prisoner, was born in St. Christopher, the son of an Irish planter. The great barrister Thomas Erskine had danced with Negro slaves and English seamen as a sailor in the West Indies. In Portland, Maine, in 1790, a Bristol sailor was hanged in the first capital punishment carried
out by the federal government of the United States of America. He had been found guilty of assisting a mutiny aboard a slave ship off the coast of West Africa. Richard Brothers, the contemporary of Despard and Blake, was twelve years with the navy as a midshipman, off the coast of Africa and in the West Indies, before resigning his commission in “Dis- gust!” because, as he was to tell the workhouse board that would incarcerate him, “I could not conscientiously receive the wages of Plun- der, Bloodshed, and Murder!” He prophesied that London would be destroyed by an earthquake on the king’s birthday, June 4, 1795. The king clapped him in an Islington madhouse, where he spent the rest of his life.

Despard was executed in February, Toussaint L’Ouverture died in an Alpine dungeon a few months later, and Robert Emmet “ran his race” in September, asking us to wait before writing his epitaph. These men were peaks of the Atlantic mountains, whose “principles of freedom, of humanity, and of justice” belonged to a single range. When the ideal was corrupted and the insurgents were defeated, the vanquished again fled; the beautiful pamphlet was stowed in someone’s sea chest; the fighting hymns got anodyne words; the incendiary gesture appeared only eccentric elsewhere. The revolution moved on. What was left behind was national and partial: the English working class, the black Haitian, the Irish diaspora. Edward and Catherine Despard’s conspiracy for the human race thus temporarily failed.


Chapter Eight


4. PRO, P. C. 1/3564, 14 February 1803.


6. Despard Family MSS., [Elizabeth Despard], *Recollections on the Despard Family* (c. 1850), 22.

7. Bodleian Library, Burdett Papers. Ms. English History, c. 296, fols. 9–11; M. W. Pat-


15. Charles Coote, Statistical Survey of Queen’s County (1801).


17. Despard Family MSS., Jane Despard, Memoranda connected with the Despard Family recollections (1838).

18. [Elizabeth Despard], Recollections on the Despard Family.


24. Major General Archibald Campbell, “A Memoir Relative to the Island of Jamaica” (1782), King’s 214, British Library.
25. [Elizabeth Despard,] Recollections on the Despard Family, 22.
32. Collections of the New-York Historical Society (1884), entries for 23 April, 27 May, 21 June.
35. Peter Hulme points out that barbeque and canoe are both etymologically Caribbean words. See his Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797 (London: Routledge, 1986), 210–11.
38. Thomas Dancer, A Brief History of the Late Expedition Against Fort San Juan So Far as it Relates to the Diseases of the Troops (Kingston, 1781), 12.
40. See Governor Dalling’s defense of his role in his Narrative of the Late Expedition to St. Juan’s Harbour and Lake Nicaragua, 13; Germain MSS., vol. 21.
41. Moseley, Treatise on Tropical Diseases.

44. C. O. 700/13.


51. Despard to Lord Sydney, 23 February 1787, CO 123/4, fo. 49; Despard to Lord Sydney, 24 August 1787, CO 137/50; Burdon, ed., *Archives of British Honduras*, 1:159, 161.

52. Despard to Sydney, 24 August 1787, CO 123/5; Edward Marcus Despard, “A Narrative of the Publick Transactions in the Bay of Honduras from 1784 to 1790,” 8 March 1791, CO 123/10.


54. Despard, “Appendix to the Narrative of Publick Transactions in the Bay of Honduras 1784–1790,” CO 123/11. Perhaps she was the Catherine Ernest included among a list of the “poor people of colour” from the Mosquito Shore. Her name does not recur on the list of new settlers who received the lots in Belize Town distributed by Des-
pard several months later, a fact consistent with the hypothesis that Catherine had meanwhile become his wife. See Robert White, *The Case of the Agent to the Settlers on the Coast of Yucatan*.


56. *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People during the late awful calamity in Philadelphia in the year 1793* (1794).


63. P. C. 1/3514 f. 100.


65. *Paddy’s Resource Being a Select Collection of Original and Modern Patriotic Songs, Toasts and Sentiments Compiled for the use of the People of Ireland* (Belfast, 1795).


68. Thomas Russell, *Address to the People of Ireland* (1796).


72. Despard’s brother considered his part in the mob to be “extremely foolish; had he possessed common prudence he might now be in comfortable circumstances.” Despard Family MSS., Letter to Andrew Despard from J. Despard, 28 May 1796.
77. PRO, P.C. 1/3553, Examination by Richard Ford.
78. PRO. KB 1/31, pt. 1.
84. Will Chip, *Village Politics, addressed to all the mechanics, journeymen and day labourers in Great Britain*, by Will Chip, a country carpenter (1793).