

Letters from the Earl of Balcarres, Governor of Jamaica, about the Maroon War in Jamaica.

These are dispatches that Balcarres sent to his sister, the Countess of Hardwicke, to keep her informed of his activities (see below).

All text outside of square brackets is transcribed directly from the original documents. Editorial notes, references and gaps in the transcription are bracketed.

[f.157]

[No. 1]

Balcarres to Henry Dundas, Spanish Town, 3 Aug 1795

My Lord Duke

It gives me particular concern to be under the necessity of communicating the intelligence of internal commotion in this island. The following is a transcription of the letters which first apprized me thereof.

Copy of Letter from the Magistrates of the Parish of St James

Montego Bay 18th July 1795

“My Lord

We are sorry that a very serious disturbance is likely to break out immediately with the Maroons of Trelawny Town. They have obliged the superintendent to quit the town. They have threatened the destruction of the plantations nearest them. All the people belonging to the town have been called in; the women are sent into the woods, and between this and Monday they propose to kill their cattle, and those children who may be an incumbrance [sic]. The chief of this we have in evidence from various individuals, but for the information of your lordship we inclose the last letter from the superintendant.

[...]

[f.158] The immediate cause of this disturbance was the inflicting the punishment of flogging on two maroons who had been convicted by the evidence of two white people of killing tame hogs.

Since writing the above Mr Schaw inhabiting their Boundaries has informed us that they expect this day to be joined by the Accompong Maroons; but they have delayed their attack till tomorrow or Monday; when it will be by two parties, on each parish and that they expect to be joined by some negroes of some particular estates.

We have the honour to be [...] Geo. Maclean, Saml. Vaughan Jun, Donl Campbell, Willm Duncan, J. R. James, John Perry, Naclaurin Gillies, J. Ingram.

p.s. We are in want as the Custos before advised of both arms and ammunition.”

[f.159] Having received those dispatches on the 19th ult and being very apprehensive for the terrible consequences of an insurrection in this island I determined to loose no time in sending three troops of the 20th Light Dragoons to keep in awe the negroes in the neighbourhood of Trelawny Towns. They marched that evening under the command of Captain Wallen[?].

The following day, my alarms were increased by a letter from one of the Magistrates of Montego Bay sitting in his judicial capacity, stating that the negroes of nine plantations had presented remonstrances [sic] against their managers; known in the country as men of remarkable clemency. It was also substantiated to me by the strongest evidence, herewith sent, that the Maroons of Trelawny Town could command the aid of the plantation negroes at pleasure.

I conceived that not a moment should be lost, in apprizing the country of their danger; it appeared to me that the island was perhaps on the very brink of destruction, and the alternative that presented itself did not convey much comfort to my mind; that I must either strike at the Maroons, & cut the very root of rebellion, or that this valuable colony was for ever gone.

To think of reducing a race of men, who had hitherto resisted successfully every force brought against them; who had long maintained themselves in their mountains and fastnesses; and who actually held their situation and property under a solemn treaty & compact made with this island – those were circumstances that did not hold out any flattering view. But, the necessity of giving the Maroons a severe and sudden check was decisive in my mind.

I therefore assembled His Majesty's Privy Council, and laid before them the letters and authorities which I had received. The Council was pleased to recommend to me the measure of assembling a Council of War and to propose to them the question, whether it was or was not proper to declare Martial Law.

[Martial Law declared Sun 2 Aug]

The very sudden appearance of the three troops of dragoons at Montego Bay, operating like lightning, has hushed the clamours of the plantation negroes.

[I have the honour to remain, etc. 'The Right Honourable Henry Dundas' is addressee at bottom, but his name crossed out.]

[f.160] Extract of a letter from Saml. Vaughan Esqr. to Lewis Cuthbert Esq [...]

[Writes about 'negroes of several estates have within these few days made complaints against management; altho' belonging to estates that are understood to be managed with great clemency. I was on the bench today with our Custos and another Magistrate, when a complaint of this kind came from all the negroes of Content Estate in this Parish [St James]. Mr Barrett tells me he goes this evening to Anchovy Bottom to quiet a complaint of a similar nature. Tryall Negroes have done the same yesterday, and the custos has within these few days had four or five similar applications.']

[f.164] [Appears to be Balcarres to Dundas, Head Quarters, Vaughan's Field, 11 August 1795]
[No. 2]

[...] [On council of war and declaration of martial law] Having obtained the most perfect knowledge of every road, path, & tract of the minutest description, that let into the Trelawny Maroon Towns, I resolved to blockade their country by seizing on every entrance, altho the manoeuvre was to be performed on a circle of forty square miles of the most rugged & mountainous country in the universe.

For this purpose & to conceal my design, I ordered secretly and confidentially, the Custodes of Parishes & Colonels to assemble their militia, to make a search for concealed arms in all the negro huts over the island.

I also gave orders for their seizing the respective passes to the Trelawny Maroon Towns. This was executed on the morning of the 9th inst. with a precision that would have done honour to any troops.

[...] I arrived at Montego Bay on the 8th and at Vaughan's Field within a mile and a half of the Maroon Towns on the 10th inst.

It is remarkable that a manoeuvre embracing the movement of all the Light Dragoons, the seizing on every pass by a scattered militia, & the operation of a fleet beating to Windward, & afterwards falling down the length of the island should have appeared as comprised in the space of 7 days. Martial Law having been declared at Spanish Town on the 2nd Inst. & all the posts up to the boundaries of the Maroon district being actually occupied by His Majesty's Forces on the morning of 9th inst. [...]

[f.175] [No. 5] [Balcarres to Dundas, Head Quarters Montego Bay 25 Aug 1795]

Sir. I have inclosed to his Grace the Duke of Portland the chain of evidence which induced me to take the strong steps I have adopted; in which I have been supported by all the leading interests in the country.

I leave it with His Majesty's Ministers to determine upon the weight due to that evidence. I acted upon it, and had I temporized, or remained inactive I might only have submitted correct proofs of the causes by which His Majesty had lost his Island of Jamaica.

My opinions were – that the Trelawny Maroons possessing a country of inconceivable strength; a district abounding in ground provisions, and as a point concentrating in a moment the five smaller maroon nations; were a force formidable to this country.

But, as a power commanding at their pleasure the aid of the plantation negroes, the properties and liberties of every person in this island were at their disposal, & under their dominion.

They were a people enjoying the most uncontrouled freedom; possessing every comfort of life.

Their numbers were 276 persons in the year 1749. In July, 1755, they had increased to 660, exclusive of their numerous children by female slaves, residing on the low plantations.

The nature of their connections was alarming; and their resources, their views, & the example of St Domingo, naturally pointed their way to the dominion of this country. [B states that provisions for up to 18 months were found along with evidence of cultivation in the cockpit country suggesting that the maroons were aiming at self-sufficiency, something they had not done since 1738, he claimed.]

[...] [On the campaign to bottle up and seek out the maroons:] Numerous parties of militia, armed confidential negroes, and the Accompong Maroons, supported by His Majesty's Troops, are in pursuit of them. Immense rewards are offered by the country for their destruction.

[f.175] I was obliged to move with celerity and to strike with rapidity as the safety as well as the credit of this island must have been materially injured by any procrastination.

[f.180] Balcarres to Countess of Hardwike, Montego Bay, 1 Sept 1795

I have been exposed to fatigue & the open air on the high maroon mountains of Jamaica for this month past, & engaged in an arduous bloody war with the maroons, if I had not attacked them as I have done, my firm opinion is that Jamaica & millions of property was inevitably lost. To give you & Lady B. the history of what I have been about, I send you a copy of my publick dispatches which must be used however with some delicacy as ministers do not like to have such things bandied about. [...]

As I have been much engaged in intriguing with all sorts of people of late, I have discovered & ferretted out this business alone the indolence of this country not permitting the inhabitants almost to see their danger altho presented to their eyes. I have had the good fortune however to carry with me all the leading interests in the country & my conduct will be publickly decided upon by the legislature of this country when next they meet on the 22d of this month.

[ff.180-81] [On the difficulty and importance of his work; hopes for an English peerage]

[f.184] Balcarres to Countess of Hardwike, Jamaica, 27 Sept 1795

Dear Lady Hardwicke. I inclose to you my speech to the Assembly of this island, and also the address to His Majesty of the Council & Assembly. [?] I need not say that I have been hitherto fortunate in pleasing the people.

This war is most troublesome as it is next to impossible to get at the enemy & at the same time there are many disaffected negroes all around them, not naturally so but all corrupted by them, this rebellion is in the Leeward of the island, the maroons in the windward part of the island are by no means staunch, so I have really enough on my mind to occupy it,

We have lost Colonel Fitch the officer next in command after Colonel Sandford fell – Fitch likewise fell into an ambuscade, the chiefs are always marked & every effort made to destroy them I had no difficulty in perceiving when I went into their chief town that every shot was fired at my head. [...]

Hand this letter when you have done with it to Lady Bal.

Love to you and yours. You most afft. brother Balcarres.

[f.199]

[Balcarres to Duke of Portland, Jamaica, 23 May 1796]

My Lord Duke. As I have been very ably & generously defended in a late debate in the House of Commons by Foster Barham Esqr. I conceive it is an attention I owe him to give him a very brief statement of the origin of the Maroon War.

I have been so infamously traduced that I trust you will permit it to be published in the Sun & True Briton, and as I am of opinion that this business may be again taken up by the opposition I shall at a very early period send to your Grace my strong points of defence. [end]

[f.200]

[Balcarres to Foster Barham, Jamaica, 23 May, 1796]

Sir. I return you my most sincere thanks for the very manly & generous manner in which you have supported my conduct in the measures I adopted for the reduction of the rebel maroons.

I am astounded to find it has been asserted that the militia have been employed solely against the maroons.

The militia here were called out upon the same principle by which the militia of England were embodied. Danger was in every quarter. The island swarmed with multitudes of French people of colour that had been introduced to raise insurrection. Half the negroes on every estate were ready to revolt, but the quickness of my movements to crush the rebellion forced the slaves to wait the event of the Maroon War.

The rapidity of our march with the Light Dragoons inspired them with such terror as to prove to me the happy effects that must positively result by my continuing to work upon that passion, and this principle of the war I never lost sight of.

Four hundred negroes did however join them in rebellion, and if I had not taken the precaution of destroying all the ground provisions in the neighbourhood of the Maroon Town, this island was to a certainty gone.

Had I delayed one moment, I should have had it only in my power to inform His Majesty and the people of England with much correctness and great precision of those causes by which the valuable Island of Jamaica had been lost for ever to the British Empire.

Had I hesitated an instant no after exertion of mine could have prevented a general massacre of all the whites in the island.

My responsibility is immense. Not only the lives of His Majesty's subjects, but also the preservation to the empire of twenty millions sterling of British capital depend on the prosperity of this island.

[On the constitution of Jamaica which prevents Gov from declaring martial war arbitrarily, without first consulting a council of war, made up of the Council and representatives from the Assembly] [f.201] The acrimony of those people who seem to have no other wish than to plant the seeds of discord & confusion in the British empire makes no impression upon me. But I will tell those worth characters that neither themselves nor any man alive shall instruct me how I am to defend my post.

I am solely responsible for it, & when my past conduct is disapproved at home, His Majesty will no doubt fix that responsibility upon some other person better qualified for the import charge of Jamaica, than, your most obliged [etc] [end]

[f.202] Balcarres to Esq Hardwicke, Jamaica, June 5 1796.

My dear Lord. Many thanks to you for your letter of the 25th March under the circumstances of genl Macleods notion respecting the chasseurs & dogs I conceive ministers could take no other line than standing between his majesty & a question that might eventually be marked with public odium. I have fortunately used them with much discretion & great effect; I may fairly say all is well that ends well. [...]

[f.203] I don't know the object of government respecting St Domingo, I am afraid it is lost to Europe as Jamaica has under its lee nothing but force can ultimately save this island should ministers be satisfied in their minds that it is impossible to reduce St Domingo or even to restore it to its ancient masters the sooner it is evacuated the better, & the soldiers preserved to Jamaica.

The application of the land force here has hitherto been erroneous in my conception. They are quartered on the coast & subject to disease. I would have them fixed in the mountains thereby ensuring their health & at the same time occupying the strongholds.

Then (to use the language of Abbe Reynal) would they rush down upon their enemy like the torrents from the mountains & I can assure you any enemy would find an attack upon Jamaica a bitter pill. It is an observation deserving much attention that the mountains here not the plains produce the sustenance for man, & cause greatly all the negroes in the island must look up to possession of these mountains for food. [...] [On the maroons, Balcarres maintains that [ff203-4] Civil polity [policy?] will produce the extinction of the rest by mixing them with the mass of free people. [f.204] I may therefore say that the whole of the interior of this island is ready to be possessed by His Majesty's Troops.