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The Western Design Revised: Death, Dissent, and Discontent on the *Gloucester*, 1654–1656

Benjamin W. D. Redding 

School of History, The University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK
Email: b.redding@uea.ac.uk

Abstract

In December 1654 a large naval force departed from Portsmouth and sailed across the Atlantic. Its goal was to expand the English Commonwealth in the Caribbean at the expense of Spanish colonies. The *Gloucester*, a third-rate frigate recently constructed as part of Oliver Cromwell's ambitious shipbuilding programme, was one of the largest and most heavily armed warships of the expedition. Combining analysis of courts martial accounts, inventories, journals, letters, sailing instructions, and wills, this article argues for the *Gloucester*'s importance as a case study and microcosm for understanding the economic, political, religious, and social problems that the navy and wider Protectorate faced. It revises traditional historiography about the topic that has underestimated the significance of the naval context to the Western Design. Crucial to this new history is that the extreme hardships and religious divisions created tensions that targeted the leadership of Admiral William Goodsonn. Of particular importance in this narrative is Benjamin Blake, captain of the *Gloucester*, who clashed with Goodsonn over key policies. By focusing on the *Gloucester* and exploring its crew's experiences, this article shows that the English navy was a restricted and internally conflicted force when operating at the peripheries of the state network.

The Western Design was an amphibious project of unprecedented operational complexity.¹ It departed from Portsmouth in December 1654 and captured Jamaica but failed to seize other key Spanish holdings in the Caribbean, thereby exposing the English state's inability to control and supply its forces across the world. Carla Gardina Pestana's recent study has characterized the scheme as a forerunner of global conflict by introducing 'the challenge of conducting amphibious warfare in the tropics' with a large transatlantic

¹ 'The Western Design' was a phrase coined by contemporaries to describe the scheme's initially undefined targets in Spanish America. See J. H. Elliot, *Empires of the Atlantic world: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven, CT, 2007), p. 113.

force.² As the project was a global expedition, the rapidly expanding navy was central to its success, and yet there is no detailed study of the internal struggles the navy faced. By providing the first in-depth case study of one of the warships involved in the scheme – the *Gloucester* – this article reveals that the navy dealt with extreme hardships throughout the Design, which nearly ended with the ship's captain being brought to trial for mutiny. By exploring the challenges that the ship faced, the article shows that the navy of the Protectorate was internally conflicted and struggled to operate effectively on long-range operations.

Despite the Cromwellian regime's attempts to present the Design as a success, historians have been more sceptical of its achievements.³ It was poorly prepared, lacked clear goals, and was mismanaged through incompetence and cowardice.⁴ General Robert Venables, one of the scheme's commissioners and the leader of its land forces, has been criticized because he failed to capture Santo Domingo, Hispaniola in April 1655, the Design's first and primary target. Venables was reluctant to engage with the Spanish forces on the island and Steven Saunders Webb has described him as holding a 'pen [that] proved mightier in excuse than had his pike in war'.⁵ Focusing their attention on events on land, studies have portrayed the army as disunited, consisting of soldiers of a poor quality who died in extremely high numbers from a combination of enemy attacks, disease, and exhaustion.⁶

Although the fleet, commanded by the experienced and well-respected General William Penn, has also received some criticism from historians, it has been described as better managed, experiencing lower death counts and higher morale.⁷ By providing a detailed study of the activities of the sea forces, this article shows that this assessment is flawed. Although its methodology focuses on the challenges endured by the officers and crew on one of the most significant warships of the expedition, it demonstrates that the vulnerabilities and unrest on the *Gloucester* were also present on other vessels. Previous interpretations of the navy's stability, strength, and unity are revised by arguing that the *Gloucester's* crew experienced and observed unrest and misconduct that turned into direct resistance led by the ship's captain against the fleet's admiral. A later section of the article shows that differences of religious

² C. Gardina Pestana, *The English conquest of Jamaica: Oliver Cromwell's bid for empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2017), p. 14.

³ N. Greenspan, 'News and the politics of information in the mid seventeenth century: the Western Design and the conquest of Jamaica', *History Workshop Journal*, 69 (2010), pp. 1–26.

⁴ B. Coward, *Oliver Cromwell* (Harlow, 1991), pp. 134–5; T. Venning, *Cromwellian foreign policy* (New York, NY, 1995), pp. 81–6; B. Worden, *God's instruments: political conduct in the England of Oliver Cromwell* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 22–4.

⁵ S. Saunders Webb, *The governors-general: the English army and the definition of empire, 1569–1681* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1979), p. 151.

⁶ S. A. G. Taylor, *The Western Design: an account of Cromwell's expedition to the Caribbean* (London, 1969), pp. 87–97, 120–6; A. L. Swingen, *Competing visions of empire: labor, slavery, and the origins of the British Atlantic empire* (New Haven, CT, 2015), pp. 47–9.

⁷ D. Loades, *England's maritime empire: seapower, commerce and policy, 1490–1690* (Singapore, 2000), p. 178; N. A. M. Rodger, *The command of the ocean: a naval history of Britain, 1649–1815* (London, 2006), pp. 22–4.

and political ideologies among both seamen and officers disrupted the Design's progress and were important factors in causing this defiance.

Historians have argued that 'maritime radicalism' – defined as unrest, resistance, and mutiny orchestrated by disgruntled seamen, which challenged relations of power at sea – became especially prevalent in the navy from the second half of the seventeenth century. According to Niklas Frykman, among others, this was because of opposition to ongoing state formation which sought to create tightly organized and regulated military machines.⁸ In other words, if seamen refused to obey new naval establishments, then they resisted them. The Laws of War and Ordinances of the Sea established in January 1653 (commonly referred to as the Articles of War) outlined the expected code of good behaviour, piety, and obedience of seamen, along with the punishments for misconduct.⁹ Once per month the *Gloucester's* captain or one of his officers openly read the articles on deck and ensured that they were constantly available 'in some publique place of the ship'.¹⁰

The Western Design occurred at a crucial point in naval history, when these stricter professional regulations and organizational frameworks were being introduced and enforced. The *Gloucester's* involvement in a core internal conflict during its time in the Caribbean might indicate that maritime radicalism was targeting the newly established codes and regulations. However, this article shows that they were not the only focus of the unrest and resistance on the warship. Whereas studies traditionally define mutiny in relation to the confines of a ship – the seamen resisting the system in which 'the ship's captain stood mightily at the apex ... of authority' – in the case of the *Gloucester*, it was its captain, who also served as the second-in-command of the fleet, who threatened the stability of the navy by publicly contesting the directions of the commander-in-chief.¹¹ By challenging the prevailing relations of power at sea, the collective frustration with the scheme that the *Gloucester's* captain led and voiced was a form of maritime radicalism, although its causes do not conform to that traditionally defined by Frykman and other historians. The isolated tropical environment, combined with the multitude of political and religious beliefs within the Protectorate navy, caused widescale unrest which led to resistance, thereby making the *Gloucester* an important though exceptional case.

The *Gloucester* (Figure 1) was one of the newest warships to be built and assigned to the Design. It was also one of the largest and most heavily armed and manned vessels. It experienced almost two years in the Caribbean, and thus a study of this warship, its captain Benjamin Blake, and its crew enhances

⁸ N. Frykman, C. Anderson, L. Heerma van Voss, and M. Rediker, 'Mutiny and maritime radicalism in the Age of Revolution: an introduction', *International Review of Social History*, 58 (2013), pp. 1–14. Such radicalism that centres on collectivism has been argued to have contributed to wider resistance during the age of revolutions.

⁹ S. R. Gardiner et al., eds., *Letters and papers relating to the First Dutch War 1652–1654* (4 vols., London, 1899–1910), III, pp. 293–301.

¹⁰ Greenwich, National Maritime Museum (NMM), WYN16, fos. 17–19.

¹¹ M. Rediker, *Between the devil and the deep blue sea: merchant seamen, pirates, and the Anglo-American maritime world, 1700–1750* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 208; B. Capp, *Cromwell's navy: the fleet and the English Revolution, 1648–1660* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 192–4.

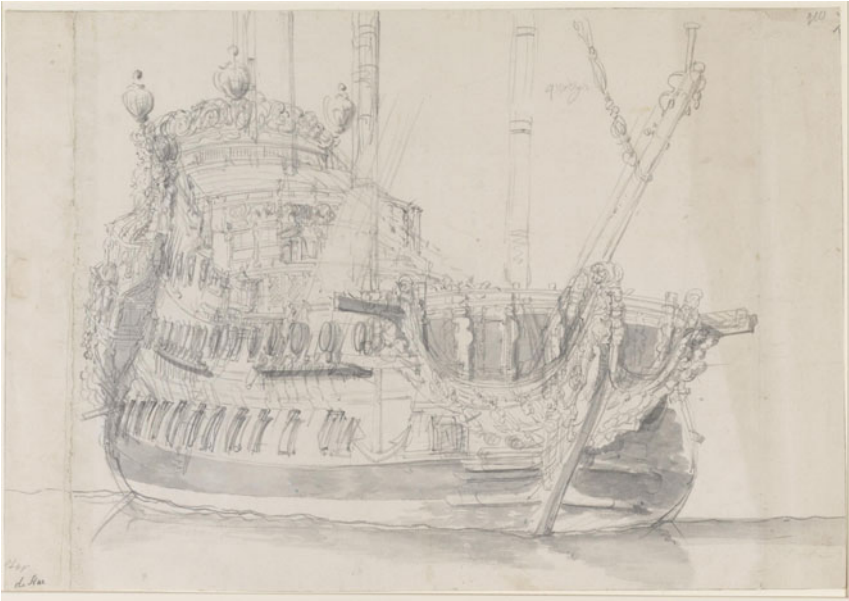


Figure 1. The *Gloucester* by Willem van de Velde the Elder, c. 1673. © Collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

understandings of the widespread unrest within the fleet. Under the command of the brother of General-at-Sea Robert Blake, the *Gloucester* followed the wider leadership of William Penn until June 1655 and Admiral William Goodsonn thereafter. Traditional accounts of the Western Design use generals Penn and Venables's return to England in the summer of 1655 as the conclusion of the campaign. Yet a large garrison and many warships, including the *Gloucester*, remained in Jamaica. This article adopts a longer chronology for understanding the enterprise to reveal the wider controversies that the navy faced during the 1650s.¹² In particular, the increasingly hostile relationship between Goodsonn and Benjamin Blake is explored. With a focus on the rising discontent of both crew and officers, it is argued that the navy in the Caribbean was an internally conflicted force that exposed the existing religious and political problems of the Protectorate.

I

The *Gloucester* had not been fully tested at sea when it arrived at Portsmouth in September 1654 to form part of the Western Design fleet. Constructed in the

¹² Recent studies have considered British influence in the Caribbean during the late 1650s by addressing the rise of piracy and the slave trade, but this article focuses specifically on discontent on a warship from Dec. 1654 to Oct. 1656. C. Gardina Pestana, 'Early English Jamaica without pirates', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 71 (2014), pp. 321–60; M. G. Hanna, *Pirate nests and the rise of the British empire, 1570–1740* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015), pp. 102–43.

private dockyard of Limehouse by the Graves family of shipwrights, the ship had been launched earlier that year, with Benjamin Blake appointed its captain by late March.¹³ When it sailed to Barbados on 25 December, the 755-ton vessel held 54 guns, 280 crew, and 30 soldiers.¹⁴ Many of the *Gloucester's* crew, like those of the accompanying ships sailing to the Caribbean, were not recruited voluntarily.¹⁵ Some were pressed for service, while others were turned over from ships brought into dock following the conclusion of the First Anglo-Dutch War. The crew and officers of the *Swan* were assigned to the *Gloucester* in May as the retiring ship was discharged.¹⁶ Forced into service, many of the seamen departing from Portsmouth would have been reluctant to participate in the enterprise.

Despite these issues impacting both morale and the likelihood of the Design's overall success, the transatlantic force was of an impressive size and included thirty-eight ships and four lesser craft.¹⁷ Smaller fleets were normally used for Atlantic travel; three years earlier, Sir George Ayscue sailed to and captured the royalist-held island of Barbados with just seven ships.¹⁸ Two second-rate and six third-rate warships, the largest of the vessels assembled, were assigned 30 soldiers as a supplement for the 1654 voyage. By contrast, two fourth rates transported 200 soldiers each while reducing their seamen to just 70. Meanwhile, fifteen fifth rates boarded 100 or more soldiers and ran reduced crews of around 50 seamen. These statistics reveal that the third-rate *Gloucester* was intended to be a weapon of the sea and not merely a vessel for transporting troops. Participating in an amphibious campaign in the Caribbean, its crew was tasked with securing the sea on behalf of the Protectorate and protecting the lesser craft carrying the land forces.

From the outset the voyage encountered complications. Sailing south-west during the final week of December, General Penn noticed that some ships were falling behind, and a decision was made to split the company to prevent further delays.¹⁹ As the 'best sailors', the *Gloucester*, along with the *Swiftsure*, *Paragon*, *Portland*, *Dover*, *Falmouth*, and *Galiot Hoy*, continued sailing at speed, while a second group followed behind. On 10 January 1655 the ships sighted La Palma in the Canary Islands. They spread out as they crossed the Atlantic and arrived in Barbados between 29 and 31 January.

Several additions to the armada were integrated in the coming months.²⁰ The greatest accretion came from foreign merchant ships found to be trading illegally in Barbados when Penn and Blake arrived, with at least twenty craft seized.²¹ The largest vessel captured was the *Brownfish* of Medemblik, one of

¹³ London, The National Archives (TNA), SP 18/81, fo. 103; TNA, SP 18/83, fo. 7; TNA, SP 18/84, fo. 54.

¹⁴ NMM, REC1, fo. 85; NMM, WYN18, fo. 1.

¹⁵ Gardina Pestana, *English conquest*, pp. 28–9.

¹⁶ London, British Library (BL), Add MS 9308, fo. 97.

¹⁷ NMM, WYN10, no. 2.

¹⁸ J. R. Powell, 'Sir George Ayscue's capture of Barbados in 1651', *Mariner's Mirror*, 58 (1973), pp. 281–90, at p. 281.

¹⁹ NMM, WYN16, fo. 11.

²⁰ NMM, REC1, fos. 80–1.

²¹ NMM, WYN16, no. 1.

the principal ports for the Dutch East India Company, of 240 tons with four guns. Its size was ideal for English exploitation, and on 8 February Benjamin Blake was assigned responsibility for the goods within the ship, as well as for sealing its gunports.²²

Despite the introduction of the Articles of War, maintaining naval discipline in the tropical environment proved difficult, especially given that many of the seamen were impressed. Days after their arrival, men going ashore to collect water were reported spoiling and stealing sugarcanes from the island's plantations. Angered by the information, Penn commanded that all men 'keep the ordinary path ways, & forbear offering any wrong, committing any spoyle, or using any injurious language or comportment to any of the inhabitants of the island'.²³ He commanded that all seamen should return to the fleet by the routine firing of the gun at night. These written orders were fastened to the *Gloucester's* main mast as well as by 'the landing place for water'. To confirm their enforcement, two or three commanders of the fleet were to walk through the town each night in the company of representatives of the island's governor. Any seamen found on shore were to be committed to the town's prison and brought to trial.

News also spread quickly on arrival at Barbados that the sea force was insufficiently victualled, requiring food allowances to be reduced by a third. Frustrated, Penn alleged that suppliers had overprovisioned several ships with 'oatmeal, pease & rice, which is furnished in lieu of fish', and in flour they were short some 1,800 lbs.²⁴ The situation worsened the longer the squadron lingered because the island was unable to adequately support the seamen and soldiers, while existing provisions were also being spoiled by the damp conditions. Ships were fitted with lead-lined breadrooms to keep goods dry, but many were found to have split, causing food to be unfit for consumption. With the men hungry and idle, the conditions bred unhappiness and unrest, which the leaders and commissioners of the Design were unable to manage through the enforcement of the Articles of War alone; consequently, these negative attitudes escalated during the *Gloucester's* time in the Caribbean as dismay became resistance, to the detriment of the Protectorate's imperial ambitions.

Penn's approval of the seizing of foreign craft that sailed in proximity to the island provided an opportunity for this distress to lead to misconduct. While the *Gloucester* was anchored in Carlisle Bay its chaplain, Thomas Fuller, was transferred to the *Dover*, which was tasked with seizing foreign shipping off Spike's Bay towards the west of the island.²⁵ On 26 February Penn accused Captain Robert Saunders of the *Dover* of overseeing the committing of 'many unhandsome & unwarrantable acts' on a ship from Hamburg by tearing 'open the men's chests, plundering & carrying away divers sorts of Goods &

²² NMM, WYN19, fo. 19; TNA, CO 1/66, fo. 82.

²³ NMM, WYN16, fos. 14–15.

²⁴ NMM, WYN16, fo. 38; TNA, CO 1/66, fo. 62.

²⁵ TNA, PROB 11/261, fo. 282.

tearing the men's shirts from off their backs to the great scandal & dishonour of the fleet'. Saunders was held personally accountable for the disorder:

I wonder not at these insolencies in your men since yourselfe having giving them such encouragements by your owne example in taking out the Negros, Goats, &c. On what ground you should presume to doe these extravaganties, I knowe not, sure I am they are beyond any commission, warrant or instruction you have received. I hoped better things from you.²⁶

Penn here referred to the case of the *Windhound of Fernambuck*, which the *Dover* had a week earlier plundered of tobacco, as well as of two enslaved West Africans whom Saunders had taken on board his frigate.²⁷ The behaviour encouraged Saunders's crew to loot the inhabitants of other seized vessels.²⁸ Evidently, the naval command was unable to effectively regulate conduct on its ships, especially when prize taking.

Religion was used to reinstate the importance of onboard discipline. The *Gloucester's* crew were reminded of the spiritual nature of their mission through daily services and in some cases bi-weekly sermons led by the serving chaplains: Thomas Fuller, Daniel Harcourt, and Francis Stubbs.²⁹ Some ships, such as the merchant and prize craft acquired, were unlikely to have their own ministers. This provided seamen with an excuse to travel ashore to 'heare the Gospel preached' and to idle on land. Penn only expected ministers to be 'well principled in religion' and that their 'practise in life & conversation [should be] agreeable to the rule of the Gospel'; in other words, he expected them to act soberly and in a godly manner.³⁰ This open toleration of reformed faiths was well received by some, especially by those who held more unorthodox and extreme puritan beliefs, but it was not universally supported at home or within the fleet and it later became a topic of disagreement that undermined the Design's productivity.

Nevertheless, Penn sought to use faith to reinforce conformity and obedience. Sundays were reserved for rest and worship, while the commissioners occasionally declared additional holy days. For example, 9 February was 'set apart to give the Lord thanks for his mercy hitherto bestowed on us, and to desire the continuance thereof'; two days later, 'Being Sabbathday, nothing was done'.³¹ Strict directions were enforced to regulate bad conduct, with blasphemy, swearing, and being drunk punished by the payment of 'five shillings or twenty pounds of sugar' for each offence; non-payment of this fine resulted in twenty lashes on the bare back.³² Despite all these attempts to control behaviour through both religious and secular means, the navy had already

²⁶ NMM, WYN16, fo. 26.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 1, fo. 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, fos. 24–5, 28, 37.

²⁹ Capp, *Cromwell's navy*, pp. 307–8.

³⁰ NMM, WYN16, fos. 17–19.

³¹ NMM, WYN10, 9 and 11 Feb. 1655 (*Rooth diary*); printed in J. F. Battick, ed., 'Richard Rooth's sea journal of the Western Design, 1654–55', *Jamaica Journal*, 5 (1971), pp. 3–22, at p. 5.

³² NMM, WYN16, fo. 16.

shown signs of being poorly prepared, with restless crews. From the beginning of the West Indies campaign, the Cromwellian navy struggled to manage and sustain itself, fomenting unrest and developing the conditions for maritime radicalism.

II

Traditional accounts of the events that followed at Hispaniola have focused on the role of the army, at the expense of providing sufficient attention to the navy. S. A. G. Taylor described the story of ‘an army deserted by its General on a faraway island’.³³ By concentrating on the navy, and on the *Gloucester*’s contribution to the assault, it becomes apparent that mistakes at sea led by Vice Admiral Goodsonn contributed to later resistance directed against him.

By March 1655 preparations to leave Barbados were underway, although the location of the mission’s target remained a secret known only by the Design’s commissioners. To reinforce the army, a regiment of 1,200 seamen was formed. These seamen trained on shore ‘almost every day’ in the build-up to leaving Barbados.³⁴ Warrants appointing Goodsonn as colonel of the regiment of seamen and Blake as lieutenant-colonel, his second-in-command, were produced on 19 March.³⁵ Blake had previously served in the army during the Civil Wars, and this influenced his selection.

With victuals and resources diminishing, it was imperative that the squadron left quickly. To this end, Penn signed eighteen warrants appointing commanders to the foreign prizes captured off Barbados, which were repurposed to support the campaign.³⁶ Some sixty ships prepared for the assault, along with several supporting craft. The *Gloucester* carried some of Colonel Anthony Buller’s regiment when it departed on 30 or 31 March.³⁷

Councils of war held on the days preceding the assault on Hispaniola determined that the army was to land at the River Haina approximately six to seven miles west of Santo Domingo.³⁸ The attack was planned to be staged in two parts: first, six regiments would land to the west of the city, and second, Buller’s regiment would come from the east.³⁹ On 13 April the fleet reached Santo Domingo, where it split into the two bodies of the assault. The *Gloucester* travelled west, with Goodsonn, sailing in the *Paragon*, having overall command of the squadron’s disembarkation on the River Haina. However,

³³ Taylor, *Western Design*, p. x.

³⁴ NMM, WYN16, fo. 39.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, fo. 48.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, fo. 44.

³⁷ C. H. Firth, ed., *The Clarke papers, selections from the papers of William Clarke* (4 vols., London, 1891–1901), III, pp. 54–60; *Seventh report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, part I: report and appendix* (London, 1879), p. 571.

³⁸ C. H. Firth, ed., *The narrative of General Venables, with an appendix of papers relating to the expedition to the West Indies and the conquest of Jamaica, 1654–1655* (London, 1900), p. 18.

³⁹ G. Penn, ed., *Memorials of the professional life and times of Sir William Penn* (2 vols., London, 1833), II, pp. 46–51; Firth, ed., *Narrative of Venables*, p. 18.

when the force reached the agreed landing point, Goodsonn decided to continue sailing westward, frustrating General Venables:

I told [Goodsonn that the River Haina] was the place we designed to land at, and that we would attempt that place before we went to the Leward Point. He said he durst not venture the Fleet without a Pilot in a strange and dangerous place ... the wind was against us, and that we must go to the Leward Point. I then protested my dissatisfaction, at these passages, and so per force was carried to the West Point, which occasioned a long and tedious March Forty Miles or thereabout in a Woody Country we know not.⁴⁰

According to Colonel Richard Holdip, who witnessed Venables confronting Goodsonn, the vice admiral claimed that there was a chain lying across the mouth of the harbour of the original landing site. The principal leaders were in conflict before the force landed, and few officers supported Goodsonn's decision. Writing retrospectively, Holdip alleged that because the harbour chain was suggested by 'so eminent a person' no pilots would contest it at the time, but afterwards, in confidence, one of the pilots told Holdip that 'there neither was, nor did he believe there could be any such thing'.⁴¹

It could be argued that Goodsonn's caution was sensible considering the contrary wind and waters that even the pilots were unfamiliar with, but his reputation among his men was nevertheless tarnished by the incident, causing his leadership to be later undermined.⁴² Henry Cary, secretary to the commissioners, attested that:

being present in the great Cabin aboard the *Paragon*, I heard General Venables ask of Vice Admiral Goodsonn whether they were yet fallen in with the River ... whereupon the Vice Admiral reply'd that they had over shot it, as he thought. Whereat the General wondering, and saying that it was resolv'd to land there if they could, he further added that he had no orders to stop there.⁴³

The squadron sailed for a further six hours before landing at the unpopular site of the River Nizao. The army disembarked at 4 a.m. on 14 April and included Goodsonn and Blake in command of the regiment of seamen. Rear Admiral Edward Blagg commanded the squadron as it sailed back to the city.⁴⁴

The western regiments were exhausted when they arrived at the River Haina, having marched further overland than initially intended to rendezvous

⁴⁰ Firth, ed., *Narrative of Venables*, pp. 20–2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3.

⁴² Gardina Pestana, *English conquest*, pp. 70–2, 90–1. Gardina Pestana has suggested that Goodsonn's decision could have been the correct one because of 'great surges of the sea', but his decision to sail further away, as opposed to waiting a day to try in the Haina again, 'condemned the army'.

⁴³ Firth, ed., *Narrative of Venables*, pp. 23–4.

⁴⁴ *Rooth diary*, 15 Apr. 1655.

with Buller's eastern force. To Goodson's dismay, on reaching the river many of the ships had already anchored close to the originally assigned landing site that he had previously insisted was inaccessible.⁴⁵ Once they were united, the regiments attempted to advance on the city but were ambushed by a small Spanish defence force, causing them to fall back to the river, where they remained for the next eight days.⁴⁶

While the exhausted army recovered, the *Gloucester* and the majority of the other warships remained within cannon shot, in order to deter Spanish attempts to oust the English force on land.⁴⁷ To further distract the Spanish defences away from the River Haina, the *Hound*, *Arms of Holland*, *Falmouth*, *Laurel*, and *Dover* sailed in proximity to the mouth of Santo Domingo's harbour, although by 20 April they fell slightly back to avoid becoming 'a mark to be shot at'.⁴⁸ On 23 April the *Gloucester*, along with several other warships, also anchored close to the mouth of the harbour, in preparation for a fresh assault on the town, which took place two days later.⁴⁹ The army advanced as a single body along the waterside towards the city, where it clashed with Spanish forces.⁵⁰ Lieutenant Simon Evans, who likely commanded the *Gloucester* while Blake was on land, watched as the numerically superior English land force was again beaten into a retreat.

More than 500 Commonwealth lives were lost in the massacre, but an even greater number fell victim to sickness, thirst, and hunger.⁵¹ The perilous campaign had produced a melancholic and unruly atmosphere that lingered throughout the *Gloucester's* time in the Caribbean. By 30 April the decision had been made to abandon the assault. While the expeditionary force waited to board the ships, 'the rains [were] encreasinge, our men weakninge, all even to death fluxing, the seamen aboard neglecting, that forces us to eate all our trope horses'.⁵² Dying in the scorching sun, the land forces suspected that the navy had refused to supply them with the provisions needed for survival. Venables defended his conduct in the expedition by arguing that the navy's service caused the failure of the Design by 'giving my men no Victuals, or too short in proportion, also in denying to lend me Arms for those that wanted ... [and by] refusing to run the fleet into the Haven, landing us against vote and desire so far of the Town'.⁵³ The army was at the mercy of the seamen for provisions, and neither party was satisfied with the result.

While the navy did not keep the army sufficiently supplied on the island, the reasons for this are more complex than negligence or vindictiveness. The coastline could not harbour large frigates such as the *Gloucester*, forcing

⁴⁵ Firth, ed., *Narrative of Venables*, pp. 20–2.

⁴⁶ *Rooth diary*, 17 Apr. 1655.

⁴⁷ *Seventh report of the Royal Commission*, pp. 571–3.

⁴⁸ *Rooth diary*, 18–20 Apr. 1655.

⁴⁹ Penn, ed., *Sir William Penn*, II, pp. 46–51; T. Birch, ed., *A collection of the state papers of John Thurloe* (7 vols., London, 1742), III, pp. 754–5.

⁵⁰ Penn, ed., *Sir William Penn*, II, p. 88.

⁵¹ *Seventh report of the Royal Commission*, pp. 571–3.

⁵² Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, III, pp. 504–8.

⁵³ Firth, ed., *Narrative of Venables*, pp. 56, 101–2.

them to remain at a distance while smaller tender ships served as the points of contact instead. Conditions around the island were dangerous. According to Rear Admiral Dakins, seamen 'were labouring hard to supply them with provisions; brandy, match, and powder spent apace [but] the sea breaking so far from the shore, it was very difficult to send in any boats for water at Haina; that he had lost one boat, and two or three men, about it'.⁵⁴ Due in large part to Goodson's refusal to land the regiments at the originally agreed destination, the relationship between land and seamen was fraught. The army accused the navy of negligence; in response the seamen rallied against the soldiers, calling them cowards as they left the island. The whole expedition was agitated by the failure: although the army had been dealt the greatest blow on Hispaniola, discontent and unrest surfaced among the seamen and their officers, leading to questions being raised concerning the Design's overall policies and leadership. Goodson's poor decision compromised the expedition's success and contributed to the later resistance that targeted him.

III

To alleviate concerns following the failure at Hispaniola, and with resources declining, a council of war quickly determined that the less heavily defended and populated island of Jamaica would be the next target to attack. Jamaica was sighted on the morning of 9 May, when Penn distributed orders that all ships drawing less than twelve feet of water were to assault the harbour. The *Gloucester*, one of the most powerful of the fleet, remained in waters of a greater depth.⁵⁵ According to Commissioner Gregory Butler, Penn insisted on leading the charge right into the harbour: 'he would not trust the army with the attempt, if he could come near with his ships'.⁵⁶ The Commonwealth forces were fortunate as the assault on Jamaica was easily undertaken: when they landed, the Spanish defenders abandoned the forts surrounding the harbour and fled to the nearby town of Iago de la Vega.⁵⁷

The *Gloucester* and its crew did not contribute to overseeing the transition of Jamaica from Spanish hands. Shortly after arriving, Penn enforced strict orders for seamen to remain on their ships, preventing them from 'rambling into the country'. To restrict the spread of disease, a block house was assigned to host the sick and wounded of the fleet, it being 'much better for them (besides what respects the health of the fleet) that they be on shore'.⁵⁸ On 11 May Blake ordered John Garse, carpenter of the *Gloucester*, as well as a number of its crew to assist with the careening of the *Hound*, which had sustained damage when it ran aground on entering the harbour.⁵⁹ The starboard side was worked on first but the men from the *Gloucester* refused to continue unless additional

⁵⁴ Penn, ed., *Sir William Penn*, II, pp. 86–7.

⁵⁵ I. A. Wright, 'The English conquest of Jamaica ... by Captain Julian de Castilla', *Camden Miscellany*, 13 (1923), pp. 1–32, at p. 1.

⁵⁶ Penn, ed., *Sir William Penn*, II, p. 31.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 31–3; Wright, 'English conquest of Jamaica', pp. 2–3.

⁵⁸ Penn, ed., *Sir William Penn*, II, pp. 100–1.

⁵⁹ *Rooth diary*, 11–12 May 1655.

victuals were offered, indicative of the rising unrest among its crew. In response, Richard Rooth, captain of the *Hound*, argued that they had been given an equal measure of brandy in the morning to those of his own crew, but this did not alleviate tensions and the matter was only resolved when Blake intervened. As a senior officer of a third rate, Blake acquired more supplies for his men and from 14 May, when they returned to assist with the work, they brought their own provisions.⁶⁰

While the *Gloucester's* crew helped with these repairs, a treaty for the surrender of the island was negotiated by Venables and signed on 17 May.⁶¹ With Jamaica secured, and supplies limited, discussions then began on returning to England.⁶² Penn and Venables were eager to leave, with a reduced fleet remaining under the leadership of Goodsonn. His selection as commander-in-chief was logical because he already held high rank and because of his prior knowledge of the area from trading there during the 1630s; despite this, he was a controversial choice owing to his complicity in the campaign's failure at Hispaniola.⁶³

After confirming Goodsonn's appointment, Penn issued a commission that included somewhat ambiguous instructions regarding the fleet's use, declaring that the reduced sea force was 'to stay for the assistance of this army, and advancement of his highness's service in America'.⁶⁴ Initial discussions did not include the *Gloucester* among the eleven frigates assigned to remain, but by the end of May its crew had been informed that they were to stay.⁶⁵ The *Gloucester's* original homebound assignment was likely changed when Penn proposed Blake as Goodsonn's deputy. Benjamin, who had long lived in his brother's shadow, remained in the Caribbean with the *Gloucester* to secure his promotion. He received his official commission as vice admiral on 26 June.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, as commonly occurred when a fleet received new directives, some members of the *Gloucester's* crew exchanged places with the seamen of departing craft. For instance, Robert Brown from the *Mathias* was appointed clerk of the *Gloucester*, replacing Abraham Brown.⁶⁷

After the returning squadron had departed on 25 June, the newly appointed vice admiral adjudicated over a series of courts martial that addressed allegations of misconduct. Forty-two trials were held on the *Torrington* (the admiral's newly assigned flagship) between the summers of 1655 and 1656, with Goodsonn and Blake serving as president and deputy. Idle seamen were restless and in poor health; as the ships were frequently anchored in harbour, they became negligent and unruly. Courts martial were convened only while the squadron was stationed in Jamaica, to allow Goodsonn and Blake (holding warrants to convene them) to preside, but also to secure the attendance of the

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 14 May 1655.

⁶¹ Gardina Pestana, *English conquest*, pp. 123–4.

⁶² Penn, ed., *Sir William Penn*, II, pp. 109–12.

⁶³ B. Capp, 'Goodsonn [Goodson], William (1609/10–1680)', ODNB; Capp, *Cromwell's navy*, p. 162.

⁶⁴ Penn, ed., *Sir William Penn*, II, pp. 114–18.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁶⁶ BL, Add MS 18986, fos. 202–4.

⁶⁷ NMM, WYN16, fo. 73.

other captains in harbour. The number of existing trial records, the range of allegations brought against the accused, and the often-widespread unrest described, present a Caribbean fleet that was not godly and united, but distressed, conflicted, and at times insubordinate.⁶⁸ They show that the maritime radicalism which later emerged, targeted against Goodson's leadership, was not solely a reaction to law and regulation but was also a result of circumstance and the challenging conditions that the seamen served in.

The most serious and revealing case was held against Captain John Clarke, commander of the *Selby*, who was cashiered from the fleet for misdemeanours including drunkenness, embezzlement, the beating of his crew, putting the ship's dog on its paybooks, and keeping the company of a 'lewd' and 'idle woman' inside his cabin at night, from whom he contracted gonorrhoea.⁶⁹ Where the woman originated from is unknown, but she probably accompanied the fleet from Barbados or St Kitts. Considered a distraction that could lead to immoral activities, women at sea were viewed as bad luck.⁷⁰ Blake and Goodson also oversaw the sentencing of William Saunders on 21 September 1655 for acts of attempted buggery against three men, which is possibly the earliest recorded trial by the admiralty of a mariner for 'homoerotic indecency'.⁷¹ The accusers reported that Saunders had attempted to seduce them, with him taking one of the men 'by the hand and [offering] to thrust it into his breeches'. The court dealt with Saunders with severity, sentencing him to thirty-nine lashes while having his nostrils slit and then cured as a mark.

Goodson continued to convene courts martial on the *Torrington* during his time in the Caribbean. On 11 October 1655, however, illness led Blake to temporarily replace him as president of a trial against John Baylie, the boatswain's mate of the *Loyalty*. Baylie was convicted of blasphemy and insults against his superior officers and sentenced to thirty-nine lashes, thirteen of which were given on the *Gloucester*. He was then ordered to bear an iron ring around his neck for the remainder of his employment.⁷² Punishments of such a brutal and public nature were approved for two main reasons: first, to humiliate and chastise the individual convicted, and second, to deter fellow seamen from offending.

Perhaps to alleviate growing unrest, during the initial months following Penn's departure the remaining naval force returned to sea. Despite the seamen being reported as 'very sickly' and with deaths daily reported from the outbreak of disease, on 31 July 1655 Goodson and Blake led a squadron of

⁶⁸ In contrast, see Capp, *Cromwell's navy*, p. 91.

⁶⁹ Oxford, Bodleian Libraries (Bodleian), MS Rawlinson A. 295, fos. 2–17.

⁷⁰ E. Murphy, "'A water bawdy house": women and the navy in the British Civil Wars', in R. J. Blakemore and J. Davey, eds., *The maritime world of early modern Britain* (Amsterdam, 2020), pp. 173–92.

⁷¹ Bodleian, MS Rawlinson A. 295, fos. 19–20; B. R. Burg, 'Officers, shipboard boys and courts martial for sodomy and indecency in the Georgian navy', in C. A. Fury, ed., *The social history of English seamen, 1650–1815* (Woodbridge, 2017), pp. 89–106. Burg previously suggested that the earliest known date for such a trial was 1704.

⁷² Bodleian, MS Rawlinson A. 295, fos. 20–1.

nine ships towards the Spanish Main, where Santa Marta was targeted.⁷³ They arrived on 24 August; the town's limited defences were overcome in an hour, most inhabitants fled into the woods, and the 200 houses and churches were sacked and burned. It was a futile and unworthy endeavour for such a potent sea force, with the only major gain being thirty pieces of ordnance. Raiding was a common tactic employed in the Caribbean for smaller fleets and privateering vessels but not necessarily for a potent naval force. As the enterprise's objectives remained unclear, the action was controversial but conformed to the vague instructions of the Lord Protector. The men tasked with the assault plundered the town, with Goodson noting that the goods were 'sold at each ship's mast [and] in the whole amounted to four hundred seventy-one pounds'.⁷⁴ Leaving on 7 September, the squadron sailed west until it reached Cartagena, but on sighting several heavily armed Spanish ships in the harbour it retired to Jamaica.

Plans to return to sea were discussed but they were abandoned when, on 1 October, Major Robert Sedgewick arrived from England. No further operations were undertaken in the month that followed and Sedgewick, who was appointed governor of Jamaica, expressed his disappointment, writing that the plundering and burning of towns was 'not honorable for a Princely Navy, neither was it I think the worke designed'.⁷⁵ As later events would show, Sedgewick's views were widely shared.

Blake was eager to return to sea to antagonize the Spanish. After more than two months in harbour he set sail in the *Gloucester* on 22 November, commanding nine ships off Cartagena, where he planned to intercept Spanish shipping. Goodson was hesitant to sail and remained at Jamaica, leaving the *Gloucester* to serve as the commanding ship but surely building friction between the admiral and his deputy. Yet the ship's adventure was short-lived as its foremast was struck in a storm, causing its yards to be cut away and 'the sea running high [they] could not save anything'.⁷⁶ This forced Blake to return to Jamaica.

The *Gloucester* remained at the island for the next three months while it was repaired, during which time the only notable use of the navy was when Captain Richard Newbery in the *Portland* led a small squadron of five ships to the coast of Cartagena but with no tangible results.⁷⁷ By March, with most of the squadron in harbour, including the *Gloucester*, boredom and unrest spread among the seamen. Tensions escalated, with Sedgewick writing 'the truth is, our seamen are bravely resolved, and much gape and breath after action' and yet, because of the land force's fragility, 'the fleet must in a great measure eye that affair, which makes us out of capacity to act otherwise as we would'.⁷⁸

⁷³ TNA, SP 18/100, fo. 250; TNA, CO 1/32, fos. 67–9.

⁷⁴ Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, iv, pp. 159–60.

⁷⁵ NMM, AGC/13/23; TNA, CO 1/32, fos. 108–13.

⁷⁶ Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, iv, pp. 451–3.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 537–8; TNA, CO 1/32, fos. 171–2.

⁷⁸ Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, iv, pp. 604–6.

Exploring some of the crew of the *Gloucester's* experiences after Penn's departure revises previous historiography which argued that the navy survived the Western Design largely unscathed while the army garrison was dealt a bitter blow.⁷⁹ Attitudes and morale worsened because of high sickness and death rates, fostering the conditions for maritime radicalism of both crew and officers. In August 1655 Matthew Clerke, surgeon general of the squadron, supplied medicine to the *Gloucester* that was intended to last for nine months. Edward West, the ship's surgeon, received the goods, leaving Clerke to comment that 'sicknes and indisposition of body, many times accompanied with death, have beene most men's inseparable companions'.⁸⁰ Thomas Fuller, chaplain of the *Gloucester* until February 1655, died of sickness six months later on the *Dover*.⁸¹ Sixteen wills from the crew have survived, with nine dated from June to December 1655, during the Caribbean's wet season. They offer a unique opportunity to understand the impact of sickness on the crew and the procedures surrounding the death of mariners. Seaman Thomas Measner died shortly after 14 August 1655, with his crewmate Alexander Leedes serving as his benefactor, but Leedes also expired before the end of the same year.⁸²

While Blake voiced his frustration at remaining in Jamaica, sickness spread below deck; three deaths were documented on the *Gloucester* in November 1655 alone.⁸³ During this time the land garrison was dealing with a particularly serious outbreak of disease that was causing upwards of fifty people to die on a weekly basis; the wills recovered from the *Gloucester* show that the navy was unable to isolate itself from the contagion, which inevitably caused distress to its crew.

William Roper was one such individual who survived the events in Hispaniola only to die of sickness, on 28 January 1656. Expecting death, Roper offered his clothes to his messmate Robert Smith, while bequeathing the rest of his possessions to his widowed mother, Anne.⁸⁴ Often the *Gloucester's* officers served as witnesses to the signing of these documents: Thomas Marshall, the ship's boatswain, and Robert Browne, its clerk, were both present at times.⁸⁵ Roper was one of a great number in the squadron who died from sickness, with Goodson writing to Secretary John Thurloe in January 1656 that God's 'visitations hath been such, by which our men have been much weakened; and many of the best and stoutest men snatch'd away by death ... it doth so concern me, that when you think you have a very considerable fleet abroad, you have rather a shadow than a substance'.⁸⁶ Goodson and Sedgewick penned a letter to Cromwell clarifying that because of the great loss of men to sickness 'we shall want recruit of seamen as well as landsmen'.⁸⁷

⁷⁹ Loades, *England's maritime empire*, p. 178.

⁸⁰ TNA, CO 1/33, fos. 11–12.

⁸¹ TNA, PROB 11/261, fo. 282.

⁸² TNA, PROB 11/260, fos. 432–3.

⁸³ TNA, PROB 11/259, fos. 46, 230; TNA, PROB 11/260, fo. 178.

⁸⁴ TNA, PROB 11/260, fos. 177–8.

⁸⁵ TNA, PROB 11/259, fos. 96, 106.

⁸⁶ Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, IV, pp. 451–3.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 455–8.

To improve morale and to strengthen the Commonwealth, a new scheme against the Spanish Main was soon agreed and the *Gloucester* was freshly careened for service.⁸⁸ After Goodsonn had spent half a year on the island, both he and Blake navigated out of the harbour on 15 April, sailing south to land 450 men at Riohacha.⁸⁹ By 8 May the squadron departed, having plundered and set fire to the town. Repeating the actions of the previous year, the force sailed west to Cartagena, where several armed ships were sighted but, 'not being able to do anything upon them', Goodsonn in the *Torrington* returned to Jamaica, along with six other ships. His decision angered Blake, who confronted the admiral before the *Torrington's* departure. Seeking action, Blake remained near the coast. Goodsonn succumbed to Blake's demands to actively use the fleet, enabling the *Gloucester* to chase a Spanish vessel into Cartagena before returning on 3 June.⁹⁰

IV

The affair exposed a much larger issue: the establishment and maintenance of appropriate leadership for the Design's fleet. The *Gloucester's* experiences in the Caribbean had been a disturbing disappointment for its captain and crew. Not only had they lingered in Jamaica instead of being active at sea, but they also watched their numbers deplete through outbreaks of sickness. Moreover, whether on account of Goodsonn's lack of ambition or because the navy was ill prepared, the campaigns off Colombia that the *Gloucester* participated in between July and September 1655, and April and June 1656, repeated the same limited plan. They achieved nothing of significance. Writing on 10 May 1656 from New England, one spectator reflected on how 'the minds of most were averse' to the Jamaican colony.⁹¹ Goodsonn was not ignorant of the crews' low morale, commenting on 7 June 1656 that 'I find a great discouragement and affliction in the clashings of some turbulent (I might say pernicious) spirits amongst us'.⁹² Vermin were destroying provisions; ships damaged by worm were equipped with an insufficient number of carpenters; cordage and sails were worn: all of which led the admiral to write to the Admiralty Commissioners later in the same month to describe an atmosphere of disease, malcontent, and mortality.⁹³

Fuelled by the ongoing crisis, an internal conflict developed that was orchestrated by the captain of the *Gloucester*. The maritime radicalism that developed did not specifically target pre-established laws and regulations but did oppose the authority and policies of a state-appointed senior officer. Such tensions and resistance were exacerbated by the dire conditions experienced in the Caribbean. As second-in-command to Goodsonn, Blake proved willing to

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 694–5.

⁸⁹ TNA, CO 1/32, fos. 192–3.

⁹⁰ Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, v, pp. 151–3.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 96.

⁹³ TNA, CO 1/32, fos. 192–3.

openly criticize his policies, which was perhaps made easier after Goodsonn's mistake at Hispaniola. Blake's opinions regarding the fleet's deployment gathered support while simultaneously antagonizing some of his fellow senior officers. The situation led to Blake and Goodsonn repeatedly clashing.

Blake believed that he was responsible for providing a 'vigilant inspection into the affairs of the fleet' as its vice admiral. To achieve this aim, he regularly offered council to Goodsonn on how 'to employ the fleet at sea, and not keep it in harbour'.⁹⁴ One method used to communicate his concerns to Goodsonn was to offer papers on his thoughts, the first of which was presented to the Design's commissioners on 29 October 1655. It addressed the proper use of the warships, while insinuating Goodsonn's mismanagement. The admiral, according to Blake's notes on proceedings, chose to ignore his deputy's advice.⁹⁵ Although Penn left instructions signifying that the principal responsibility of the fleet was to protect and support the Jamaica garrison, Blake repeatedly pushed to attack other Spanish holdings. The situation escalated after Goodsonn received a letter from the Lord Protector expressing hope 'that you have with some of those ships ... equip'd, and [made] yourselves as strong as you can to beat the Spaniard, who will doubtless send a good force into the Indies'.⁹⁶ Was the squadron intended to attack or defend? Its mission was open to dispute both at home and in Jamaica.

With much to consider while the *Gloucester* was anchored in harbour, Blake was provided with an opportunity to witness the army's misconduct as disease spread. Observing great 'disaffection' with Jamaica, he sought to improve conditions by presenting a second paper on 29 January 1656. It, too, had no impact. Affairs continued to grow worse, with men dying at an unprecedented rate, causing him to witness a 'generall inclination and tendency' to abandon the island and with it the whole Design.⁹⁷ Desiring success both for himself and for the Commonwealth, he submitted a third paper one month later that antagonized the commissioners. On land and at sea, the forces were distressed by high mortality rates, limited provisions, and the tropical climate; Blake was accused of fomenting insubordination, thereby becoming an active participant in the maritime radicalism that opposed Goodsonn's leadership. Although the specific contents of this paper are unknown, the submission led to him being 'highly questioned' before a council. Under interrogation he agreed to withdraw the paper and, in response to the event, he 'digested [his] thoughts into another paper ... being conscious enough of treacherousness of my owne memory', which was presented on 4 March and better received.

Relations between Blake and his fellow senior officers relaxed temporarily when the fleet became distracted by preparations for the attack on Riohacha in April and May, but Goodsonn's decision to withdraw early brought the issues back to the surface. While remaining off the coast of Cartagena, the *Gloucester* sprang a leak. With water entering the hull at a rate of two feet every four

⁹⁴ Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, v, pp. 367–8.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, iv, pp. 130–1.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, v, pp. 367–8.

hours, it was forced to return to Jamaica.⁹⁸ Entering the harbour in early June, the captain received news of the untimely death of Major General Sedgewick and of a proposal to sail to Havana. Combined with the difficulties experienced by the leak, which continued to agitate and occupy the *Gloucester's* strained crew in harbour, the news moved Blake to write another paper addressing the ordering of the Commonwealth's affairs. Presenting the paper to Goodsonn privately, he was given the cold shoulder by the commander-in-chief: 'the admiral shewing himself strange to me (I suppose for my prying into some abuses formerly and very lately committed)'.⁹⁹ The admiral was clearly under significant pressure, owing to a resurgence of sickness on the island and at sea, with Sedgewick being one of the victims. A newly discovered report produced at the time of Blake and Goodsonn's confrontation recorded that the *Gloucester* had the most cases of sickness out of any of the twenty-four ships in harbour, while its crew had been reduced to 247.¹⁰⁰ Some ships with smaller crews fared worse: of the *Success's* 131-man crew, 17 were sick at the time, while an equal number had died during the previous three months. The same report determined that provisions for the fleet were unsustainable. A recent delivery of goods was found to include 'stinking meate and not fit for use', while a great quantity of brandy ordered in place of beer was found to be lost because of poor storage in wooden casks. Any resistance by Blake and his supporters was a reaction to these conditions as well as to Goodsonn's policies.

It was within this context that Goodsonn publicly denounced Blake's paper as 'unlawful', at which point the two men's dislike of each other was openly expressed. According to Blake, Goodsonn 'gave me many threatening words ... as that he would ruine me, or I him; or words to the like or worse effect'.¹⁰¹ The altercation concluded on 16 June, when a messenger stepped aboard the *Gloucester* and handed a signed order from Goodsonn to Blake demanding that he remove his flag from the ship. Blake's command of the warship had been abruptly terminated. To conclude the affair, a council of war was again called to discuss Blake's conduct. The council was presented with a petition targeting Blake and signed by Secretary William Aylesbury; the disgraced captain was denied a copy. Exposed and insulted, and in order to avoid possible repercussions by court martial, Blake requested permission to lay down his commission and return to England, which was granted.

Why had Goodsonn and the council forced one of the most senior officers in the Caribbean to resign? Considering the growing unrest in Jamaica and the recent death of its governor, the admiral was attempting to restore discipline and order while acting to prevent his own overthrow from the maritime radicalism which Blake led. A similar case against Lieutenant-Colonel Archibald, who faced a court martial on 17 June 1656 over allegations of speaking seditious words of 'dangerous consequence' that amounted to a conspiracy,

⁹⁸ TNA, CO 1/32, fo. 197.

⁹⁹ Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, v, pp. 367–8.

¹⁰⁰ TNA, CO 1/66, fos. 109–10.

¹⁰¹ Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, v, pp. 367–8.

supports this.¹⁰² The most incriminating account of Blake's wrongdoings comes from Goodson's own hand:

[Blake] was a person of such a turbulent spirit, and so opposite to me in most of my commands, that in regard of my duty to his highness and his affaires, I could not but think it necessary to remove him from hence; and because he had by his frequent feasting and entertainments only to that purposed seduced a great party in the fleet, so that it was more then probable nothing could be don therein by an ordinary way, I was content to admit of a charge against him put in by the secretary.¹⁰³

Clearly Blake was encouraging others in the squadron to support his opinions and actions, a stance that may have been easy to adopt when reflecting on Goodson's faults during the assault on Hispaniola, and on the dangerous states of repair of the warships that remained.¹⁰⁴ There is little doubt that under his command most of the *Gloucester's* crew would have supported Blake's defiance towards the established authority. Other known allies of Blake included captains Robert Saunders, Francis Kirby, and John Blyth of the *Dover*, *Laurel*, and *Selby* respectively, with Blake requesting their testimonies regarding his conduct after he had resigned.¹⁰⁵ According to Aylesbury, he had become 'a great obstacle in obstructing his highness affairs' and 'an extreme affliction to the admiral'.¹⁰⁶ The secretary was clearly agitated by ongoing affairs, identifying Blake as a renegade who was leading an already disgruntled body of both landsmen and seamen to voice their complaints; Goodson needed to act quickly to prevent the situation from escalating towards mutiny.

Writing to Robert Blackborne, secretary of the Admiralty Commission, shortly after Blake's dismissal, Captain William Godfrey of the *Marmaduke* referred to the atmosphere as being 'much agravated by reason of some commotions, and discords, that hath leatly been breed among us in the fleet'.¹⁰⁷ Aware of the tensions voiced by Blake, Godfrey wrote that 'I heartly wish that your spirit of love were more deeper stamped upon us' and described the current conditions as 'perplexed'. Blake could have led the already disgruntled and unruly seamen into open resistance against Goodson. The situation described is one of disarray, far from the stable image of the navy previously depicted by historians.

On 8 September the *Great Charity* reached Falmouth with a decommissioned Blake on board. Its captain, Thomas Bunn, dispatched the packets of letters sent from Jamaica to the Lord Protector and the Admiralty Commissioners, including Goodson's and Aylesbury's accounts of Blake's misdoings. Most of the *Great Charity's* crew returned with scurvy, while others had been harmed by the cold so that 'wee cannot handle the ship but with much

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 127–8, 139. It was decided that he was not a threat to the command structure.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁰⁴ TNA, CO 1/32, fos. 200, 204, 206; TNA, SP 18/118, fo. 251.

¹⁰⁵ Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, v, pp. 367–8.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 154–5.

¹⁰⁷ TNA, CO 1/32, fo. 212.

difficulty'.¹⁰⁸ Although this comment describes the crew of a different ship, after almost two years' service the seamen of the *Gloucester* would have been in similar condition.

V

Blake and Goodson's altercation exposed the weaknesses within the fleet and showed that the navy's efforts in the Caribbean were being affected by the wider political and religious problems faced by the Protectorate. Understanding the personal background of Benjamin Blake is important for contextualizing his actions. As the younger brother of Robert Blake, Benjamin's elevation in the navy was at least partially because of his sibling's influence. Benjamin and Robert were two of thirteen children born to Humphrey and Sara Blake; at the time of Benjamin's birth in November 1614, Robert was sixteen years old.¹⁰⁹ Their father's death in 1625 left Robert occupying the role of Benjamin's paternal figure for much of his adolescence.¹¹⁰ Benjamin served as a soldier during the Civil Wars and was recorded as an army officer in June 1647 before transferring to sea employment under his brother's patronage.¹¹¹ By 1649 Benjamin was captain of the fifth-rate *Paradox* and in the following year he was promoted to the fourth-rate *Assurance*; both ships served in squadrons commanded by Robert.¹¹² In September 1650 General Blake sighted a Portuguese fleet off Lisbon returning from Brazil and attacked it; during the encounter, Benjamin engaged with the Portuguese vice admiral, boarding and sinking the ship.¹¹³

By September 1652, Benjamin had been promoted to command the *Triumph*, one of the largest warships of the Commonwealth navy, and he served under Penn at the battle of Kentish Knock during the First Anglo-Dutch War.¹¹⁴ His rise was dealt a blow following the battle of Dungeness on 30 November 1652, when his brother chose to fly his flag from Benjamin's ship. The battle was a disaster; the flagship was boarded by the Dutch several times. Once the encounter concluded, Robert wrote to the Council of State requesting that they commission an inquiry into several ships that had fled.¹¹⁵ Three officers were dispatched to the Downs to examine the misconduct, resulting in the cashiering of Robert's own secretary, Francis Harvey, along with the arrest of three captains for neglect.¹¹⁶ Benjamin was similarly accused of neglect of

¹⁰⁸ TNA, SP 18/145, fo. 60.

¹⁰⁹ Taunton, Somerset Heritage Centre, D/P/bw.m/2/1/1, 7 Nov. 1614.

¹¹⁰ W. Hepworth Dixon, *Robert Blake: admiral and general at sea* (London, 1889), pp. 5, 14–15; M. Baumber, *General-at-sea: Robert Blake and the seventeenth-century revolution in naval warfare* (London, 1989), pp. 3–10.

¹¹¹ Baumber, *General-at-sea*, pp. 62–3; J. R. Powell, *Robert Blake: general-at-sea* (London, 1972), p. 18.

¹¹² Powell, *Robert Blake*, p. 86; J. R. Powell, ed., *The letters of Robert Blake* (London, 1937), pp. 74, 80–1.

¹¹³ Gardiner et al., eds., *First Dutch War*, I, pp. 6–7; Powell, *Robert Blake*, pp. 101–2.

¹¹⁴ Gardiner et al., eds., *First Dutch War*, II, pp. 238–44.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 91–3; Powell, ed., *Letters of Robert Blake*, pp. 184–6.

¹¹⁶ Hepworth Dixon, *Robert Blake*, pp. 184–91; Gardiner et al., eds., *First Dutch War*, III, pp. 96–9, 105, 121, 146, 273–6, 354–65.

duty and was discharged from his command.¹¹⁷ It is possible that Benjamin's dismissal was connected to a council of war held prior to the battle, when he was reported to have challenged orders and instructions in much the same way that he did in Jamaica.¹¹⁸ Although Benjamin was eventually acquitted, he did not receive another commission to command until the *Gloucester* was launched, and it was only achieved after his brother had requested a new captaincy on his behalf.

On the rare occasion that Benjamin Blake's contribution to history has been acknowledged, he has been criticized. Writing about the siblings' relationship, John Powell suggested that Robert 'must have had to subdue the petulant, self-opinionated, impetuous Benjamin'.¹¹⁹ Yet, Benjamin was well suited to the Western Design, even if it moved him away from the protection of his older brother. As well as having knowledge of the sea, he had previously lived in the Caribbean as a soldier and planter, providing him with some familiarity with the area.¹²⁰ As a sibling of one of the most powerful figures in the navy and with prior experience in the environment, Benjamin developed a belief in his own superiority of judgement during the campaign, and this attitude led to disturbances among the fleet and his eventual downfall. He was confident that he could assert his role and voice over Goodson because of his brother's backing, as had happened after the battle of Dungeness. Goodson privately acknowledged this, writing that the charges against Blake in Jamaica were not pushed, 'partly in my respect to the generall his brother', so long as he returned to England and did not continue to be 'maliciously active in vindicating himself to deprave our proceedings'.¹²¹ All these factors reflect the complex and problematic power dynamics that existed during the Interregnum.

Aside from Benjamin's relationship with his brother, another motivation that underpinned his actions in 1656 was his confessional beliefs. One of his first actions when he returned to England was to become a member of the independent church of Stepney.¹²² Stepney had a large maritime community and its pastor was William Greenhill, who preached sermons at both the Houses of Commons and Lords during the 1640s and was one of the dissenting brethren of the Westminster Assembly of Divines.¹²³ He was well connected to the Cromwellian regime, as shown by his appointment by parliament to be chaplain of Charles I's children – James, duke of York, Henry, duke of Gloucester, and Lady Henrietta Anne – after their father's execution.

¹¹⁷ TNA, SP 25/68, fo. 315; Gardiner et al., eds., *First Dutch War*, III, pp. 418–19.

¹¹⁸ Baumber, *General-at-sea*, pp. 154–63.

¹¹⁹ Powell, *Robert Blake*, p. 13.

¹²⁰ Capp, *Cromwell's navy*, p. 162; Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, v, pp. 367–8.

¹²¹ Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, v, p. 154.

¹²² London, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives (Tower Hamlets), W/SMH/A/1/1, Sept.–30 Nov. 1656. The exact date of his membership is not recorded but dated entries listed immediately after Blake show that he joined between mid-Sept. 1656 (his return to England) and 30 Nov. 1656.

¹²³ R. L. Greaves, 'Greenhill, William (1597/8–1671)', ODNB; H. Powell, *The crisis of British Protestantism: church power in the Puritan revolution, 1638–44* (Manchester, 2015), pp. 210–36.

Greenhill often recommended godly mariners for appointment as naval officers, as did several other independent ministers at the time. The Stepney church was prestigious thanks to its influential puritan pastor, and Blake became heavily invested in it following his return; in May 1657 he was granted letters of recommendation and on 9 March 1658 he was elected a deacon.¹²⁴

His decision to join Stepney church was related to, even perhaps triggered by, his command of the *Gloucester*. Whereas most captains employed for the Design accepted a chaplain sourced by the state, the Admiralty Commissioners agreed to Blake's request to secure Thomas Fuller in the role, whom the captain described as a 'profitable, plaine preacher'.¹²⁵ Given their shared upbringing and naval service, Benjamin's confessional beliefs matched his older brother's. Robert was a pious commander and, although his exact religious identity is difficult to categorize, he was strongly opposed to the Fifth Monarchists who controlled parliament until its dissolution and defeat in December 1653.¹²⁶ Allegations of 'Anabaptist' (possibly referring to Fifth Monarchist) meetings on shore during the *Gloucester's* time in the Caribbean may infer that, by appointing his own chaplain, Benjamin was seeking to prevent some of the most extreme puritan influences from infesting his own ship. Like his brother, the *Gloucester's* captain was a puritan who supported the independence of church and state, but he was opposed to the more extreme beliefs of the time, which he associated with festering disorder and unrest. The screening of his own chaplain for the *Gloucester* was intended to secure stability on board, and requesting membership of the independent Stepney church was a further step in his opposition to the most extreme denominations of puritanism, as well as being a reaction to the squadron's disorder.

Further evidence for this argument is that Goodsonn was a long-standing member of the extremist separatist Duppa church. This meant that the commander-in-chief and vice admiral, as well as many other land and sea officers, held differing confessional beliefs, belying Capp's suggestion that Blake and Goodsonn had a 'clear sense of fraternity in a common [religious] cause'.¹²⁷ The London-based Duppa church consisted of a group of dissidents who insisted on a closed communion and denounced contact with parish churches. Members refused to enter parish buildings and they condemned independents who did so.¹²⁸ Rebaptism was supported as a method for denouncing Anglican practices when transferring to the church. Allegations of Anabaptist meetings during the Design may have been made in the knowledge of Goodsonn's own ideology. His loyalty to the Duppa church caused complications within his own marriage because his wife, a member of an

¹²⁴ Tower Hamlets, W/SMH/A/1/1, 9 Mar. 1658.

¹²⁵ Capp, *Cromwell's navy*, p. 311; BL, Add MS 18986, fo. 144. Daniel Harcourt was appointed chaplain on 18 June 1655, and Francis Stubbs also occupied the position before the *Gloucester* returned to England. NMM, WYN 16, fo. 76.

¹²⁶ Baumber, *General-at-sea*, pp. 188–9.

¹²⁷ Capp, *Cromwell's navy*, p. 297.

¹²⁸ M. Tolmie, *The triumph of the saints: the separate churches of London, 1616–1649* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 21–5.

independent congregation, was 'agrieved that her Husband is not free to communicate with her in spirituall worship'.¹²⁹

Goodsonn was the most senior religious radical naval officer of the expedition. His beliefs would have been tangibly obvious during onboard services, but several other extremists accompanied him. 'The Devill's endeavours to have his chapel amongst us', reported John Berkenhead in February 1655.¹³⁰ Rear Admiral George Dakins was described as an Anabaptist and Captain Richard Newbery was accused of denying the Trinity. The result was the very disorder that Blake sought to avoid on the *Gloucester*, with the most radical puritan denominations at the very top of the squadron's command causing great unrest, as described by John Daniel, auditor general of the army, following the capture of Jamaica: 'Many such vile unworthy expressions have many off that religion, I mean anabaptists, exprest against us and the power wee act under, domineering because off their present commands at sea, taking liberty to talke what they please, as indeed wee find their actions, according to their powers against.'¹³¹

The problems caused by the employment of naval officers with the most controversial Christian views were part of wider issues within the Protectorate over religious toleration. While complaints and tensions grew among the fleet over the growth of 'Anabaptists', the same debates were being expressed in the British Isles, with Oliver Cromwell calling for liberty of conscience in his speeches to the Commons in 1654, which was opposed by parliament.¹³² The dispute caused instability at home and abroad and led to violence and resistance at sea.¹³³ For example, Vice Admiral Sir John Lawson was a known sympathizer of the Fifth Monarchists and a critic of the Protectorate regime.¹³⁴ In February 1656 he resigned when the inexperienced Edward Montagu was appointed general-at-sea for an expedition to the Iberian coast, a role to which Lawson believed he had claim. His resignation caused unrest within the navy, including rumours of mutiny that never came to pass.¹³⁵

¹²⁹ D. Brown et al., *Two conferences between some of those that are called Separatists & Independants* (London, 1650), p. 9; P. Ha, 'The freedom of association and ecclesiastical independence', in M. Davies, A. Dunan-Page, and J. Halcomb, eds., *Church life: pastors, congregations, and the experience of dissent in seventeenth-century England* (Oxford, 2019), p. 114; Gardina Pestana, *English conquest*, p. 21.

¹³⁰ Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, III, pp. 157–9; Gardina Pestana, *English conquest*, p. 25.

¹³¹ Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, III, pp. 504–8.

¹³² P. Little and D. L. Smith, *Parliaments and politics during the Cromwellian protectorate* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 202–19.

¹³³ See T. Lurting, *The fighting sailor turn'd peaceable Christian* (London, 1711). Lurting was boat-swain's mate of the *Bristol*, which was part of Robert Blake's Mediterranean fleet in 1655. His memoir reflects how Quakers on board caused 'serious Enquiry among others', with Lurting admitting that he 'gave them many a Heavy Blow, and I was Violent upon them, and a great Persecutor of them'.

¹³⁴ A comparison can be made with Ireland, where Lord Deputy Charles Fleetwood oversaw the rise of Anabaptists among the army. J. Binns, 'Lawson, Sir John (c. 1615–1665)', *ODNB*; T. C. Barnard, *Cromwellian Ireland: English government and reform in Ireland, 1649–1660* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 98–106.

¹³⁵ G. Blanchard, *Lawson lies still in the Thames: the extraordinary life of Vice-Admiral Sir John Lawson* (Stroud, 2017), pp. 76–96.

Puritanism permeated the naval ranks and, far from home in the Caribbean, its most extreme denominations became a source of controversy. It was within this arena of multi-confessional beliefs that Blake's decisions to appoint his own chaplain, denounce and attempt to reform the fleet's order and structure, and become a member of the Stepney church should be understood. The *Gloucester's* captain had experienced the disorder produced from religious extremism in the navy, which was not resolved because wider debates over tolerance in the Protectorate parliament were ongoing. His actions in June 1656, which he believed he had the right to pursue thanks to his brother's backing, were his response.

VI

The problems that the *Gloucester's* captain and crew encountered in the Caribbean reflected wider concerns within the Protectorate. Empire building and maintenance, the politics of leadership and command, and religious policy all remained contentious issues in parliamentary debate. Far away from the British Isles, these matters became sources of widespread unrest in the navy, while extreme conditions exacerbated the crews' and officers' concerns for survival, and thereby fostered direct resistance. In June 1656 Benjamin Blake, having witnessed his crew's struggles for too long, became the voice of this discontent and he was forced to resign for his actions. 'Maritime radicalism', as described by Frykman et al., was not merely a reaction to the disciplinary naval laws and regulations that developed from the 1650s.¹³⁶ Blake's case on the *Gloucester* shows that seamen and their officers were distressed by domestic and overseas policies, as well as their own environment, all of which undermined onboard working conditions and led them to criticize and disobey Goodsonn, the state's most senior naval authority in the Caribbean.

Once the disgraced Blake left the Caribbean, Richard Newbery was assigned to command the *Gloucester*. On receiving his commission, the warship prepared for a new scheme that aimed to intercept shipping coming into Havana, setting sail from Jamaica on 3 July 1656.¹³⁷ The plan was almost certainly developed to alleviate some of the growing pressure that Blake had expressed against Goodsonn. Newbery commanded the *Gloucester* as part of a fourteen-ship squadron that lingered between Cuba and Cape St Antonio. A lack of activity off the island, however, enabled Goodsonn to examine and reflect on the capabilities of the ships at his disposal. The *Gloucester* was 'so defective in almost all particulars' that it was ordered to return to England.¹³⁸

On 23 August Newbery led a small squadron of ships needing repair back to England, with the *Gloucester* as de facto flagship.¹³⁹ The returning warships included some of the most heavily armed that had remained in the

¹³⁶ Frykman et al., 'Mutiny and maritime radicalism', pp. 1–14.

¹³⁷ Birch, ed., *Thurloe*, v, pp. 340–1.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

¹³⁹ TNA, CO 1/33, fo. 21.

Caribbean: the *Torrington*, *Laurel*, *Portland*, and *Dover*. Travelling north-east, they sailed up the coast of Virginia before a violent storm scattered the small squadron. The *Gloucester* reached English waters on 14 October and five days later it dropped anchor in the Downs. Its seamen had been seriously impaired by disease and malnutrition, while the ship's hull was in poor condition. Newbery reported to the Admiralty Commissioners that

our shipp is soe bad in her sheathing, & otherwise under water, that there will be a necessity to Dock her, being very leake, her upper worke gives extraordinary way in fowle weather, being weake. Our sailes & rigging none good about her, wee have aboard but foure dayes victualls.¹⁴⁰

Just days before sighting English waters, William Mansfield of the *Gloucester* died of sickness and bequeathed all his goods to David Robins, 'his said Master' on the ship.¹⁴¹ Similarly, on 21 October, John Watson, a Scotsman from Fife, produced his last will and testament, having foreseen his death from the sickness that had already rapidly spread on board.¹⁴² The *Gloucester's* crew were waiting to dock at the time and Watson died while in the Downs. He bequeathed his clothes and 'small chest and box' to three crewmates, Hughman Creff, Thomas Walker, and James Scoller, while giving five shillings to Henry Blake, the surgeon's mate. Creff also served as executor, but died before the will was officially implemented. The crew were discharged on 31 October 1656, many of them having served on board since 1 September 1654; the accumulated wages for the officers and mariners of the *Gloucester* totalled £10,607 10s. 1d.¹⁴³

Even though Blake was relieved of command of the *Gloucester* before returning home, he would later return to service as a trusted naval officer. As Goodson noted, despite Blake's behaviour, as the brother of the general-at-sea, Benjamin was well protected. Formally disciplining him could have been perceived as a direct attack on Robert Blake. Within limits, Benjamin's attitude had been tolerated; for many, he was untouchable. Goodson and Aylesbury had sent an account of their gripes to the Commissioners of the Admiralty, but these complaints were only to be brought to trial if Blake continued to stir up unrest. Without needing to resolve the affairs that had amassed so much friction, within months of his return the *Gloucester's* first captain sought command of a new warship.¹⁴⁴ By the spring of 1657, Benjamin had received a commission to captain the second-rate *Dunbar*, which, like the *Gloucester* in 1654, was a newly launched ship. Not only had he escaped prosecution for the controversy, but he had been rewarded for his contributions in the Caribbean.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ TNA, SP 18/146, fo. 155.

¹⁴¹ TNA, PROB 11/260, fos. 178–9.

¹⁴² TNA, PROB 11/262, fo. 270.

¹⁴³ TNA, E351/2294. For the same period, total wages for the *Torrington* were £10,933 19d.

¹⁴⁴ TNA, SP 18/166, fo. 154; TNA, SP 18/167, fo. 15; TNA, SP 18/146, fo. 215.

¹⁴⁵ TNA, SP 18/165, fo. 29.

The Western Design was a complex logistical scheme that reflected many of the pre-existing tensions within the Cromwellian Protectorate. The behaviour of Blake and Goodson, and their relationship, offer vital insight for understanding the challenges faced during the campaign. Yet the issues expressed by Blake in June 1656 were not the exclusive concerns of the Caribbean forces; they were problems that centred on the rival religious and political affinities that plagued the Protectorate. Far away from parliamentary supervision, the *Gloucester* could not receive the guidance or resources to control religious ideologies or naval policy; like the rampant sickness that spread among the ship's crew, religious extremism ran wild. When examining maritime radicalism and resistance, it is important that studies also consider wider and underpinning social, political, and religious motivations.

Benjamin Blake and his crew endured extreme hardships. Bloodshed, disease, hunger, malnourishment, and idleness fostered the conditions for unrest and dissent that targeted Goodson's leadership. The transatlantic amphibious scheme was the most ambitious campaign of the English navy to date, but it was underprepared and unsustainable at sea as much as on land. The high mortality rates experienced by the army have previously overshadowed historians' understanding of the similar impacts on the warships and, as this case study of the *Gloucester* has shown, the fleet was also dealt a major blow. The Western Design showed that the Protectorate was unable to maintain a large and semi-permanent transoceanic naval force, exposing the state's limitations and divisions. It was ill-equipped, often inactive, and internally conflicted over issues including objectives and religion. Exacerbated by the challenging environment that his crew endured in the Caribbean, Benjamin Blake's insubordinate behaviour on the *Gloucester* was a symptom of the divisions and discontent already present in the navy more widely.

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