

The Western Design

When: 1654-1655

Combatants: England vs Spain

Reasons: Protectorate England wishing to challenge Spanish power, religious motivations

Other names: The Anglo-Spanish War

Key battles and places: Hispaniola, Jamaica

The earliest involvement of the professional British Army in the Caribbean came in the middle of the seventeenth century, when it was still solely the English Army. Oliver Cromwell, ruling England as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth, opted to challenge the greatest power in the Western World, Spain. The Spanish-American colonies in the Caribbean and in Central and South America had provided Spain with great wealth and it continued to be the dominant power in the New World. England, by this time, had a few Caribbean Colonies of its own, including Barbados, St. Christopher (St. Kitts), Nevis, Antigua and Anguilla.



Oliver Cromwell

In June 1654, planning and preparation began in secret for a great military expedition to the Americas. The secrecy was such that it became known by the nebulous name of the 'Western Design'. The exact motives for the expedition continue to be debated by historians and there are likely to be many contributing factors to the decision. Cromwell and his ministers could have been influenced by the economic advantages that the American colonies had afforded Spain, or wished to protect English trading vessels, which the Spanish frequently attacked. Religious motivations can also not be discounted; Cromwell himself, many leading figures of the Protectorate and a large number in England were ardent Protestant Christians, opposed to Roman Catholicism as practised in Spain and spread by them in the New World. Thus, many believed that an expedition against the Spanish was sanctioned by God, and eyewitness accounts speak of opposing 'heretics' and the 'false church'.

The Commonwealth and Protectorate

The Commonwealth and Protectorate were the systems of government that ruled Britain after the execution of Charles I in 1649 until the restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660, a period known as the Interregnum. Cromwell became Lord Protector in 1653, after forcibly dissolving parliament, which had governed the country inefficiently. Cromwell is an important figure in English military history not only for his successes in the Civil Wars, but also for his reforms to the military and the creation of the New Model Army.

Recruitment for the Army had to be carried out in secret, with the decision taken to raise new regiments from those already stationed in England. However, not only did this fail to produce the desired number of men, but the soldiers that were recruited tended to be the worst sort, ones that had been 'volunteered' by their commanders to get rid of them as they were ill-disciplined or unskilled. To try and make up the numbers, 'recruitment parties' were employed in London to forcibly recruit more men. This too failed to raise a sufficient force, with one observer noting that the men recruited in this fashion were largely criminals. Finally, it was decided that the remaining men would be recruited from the English Colonies of the Caribbean.

The expedition, under the command of General Robert Venables and Admiral William Penn, left England in December 1654 with 2,500 men, of whom only 1,000 were experienced soldiers. Penn and Venables, and the five commissioners appointed to accompany the troops, were given orders to seek the capture of the major Spanish

territories of Hispaniola, Porto Rico, Cuba and Cartagena (on the South American coast in modern-day Columbia). The expedition arrived in the English colony of Barbados early in the new year and began to recruit the required number. They recruited free men from the island and nearby English colonies; these were the first West Indians we know that joined the Army. They also, however, opted to recruit from amongst the indentured servants of the colonies, promising them freedom from their indentures if they did so.

Indentured servants

Arguably, indenture is a state which most people would consider to be slavery today; some people, as a punishment or to avoid an alternative penalty, were forced to serve for what was, in theory, a set period. This was normally around seven years, although it could be longer and or shorter, depending on the terms of the deed of indenture. There were strict rules in place about what indentured servants could do, such as with whom they could marry and have children and even from whom they could buy goods. Oliver Cromwell made liberal use of pressing people into indentured servitude and then sending them to the Caribbean. In addition to convicted criminals, this included many people from England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland who were prisoners of war, captured in Cromwell's campaigns during the seventeenth century Civil Wars in the British Isles. However, some people seeking a new life, willingly became indentured servants for a set term, in order to earn passage from Europe to the New World.

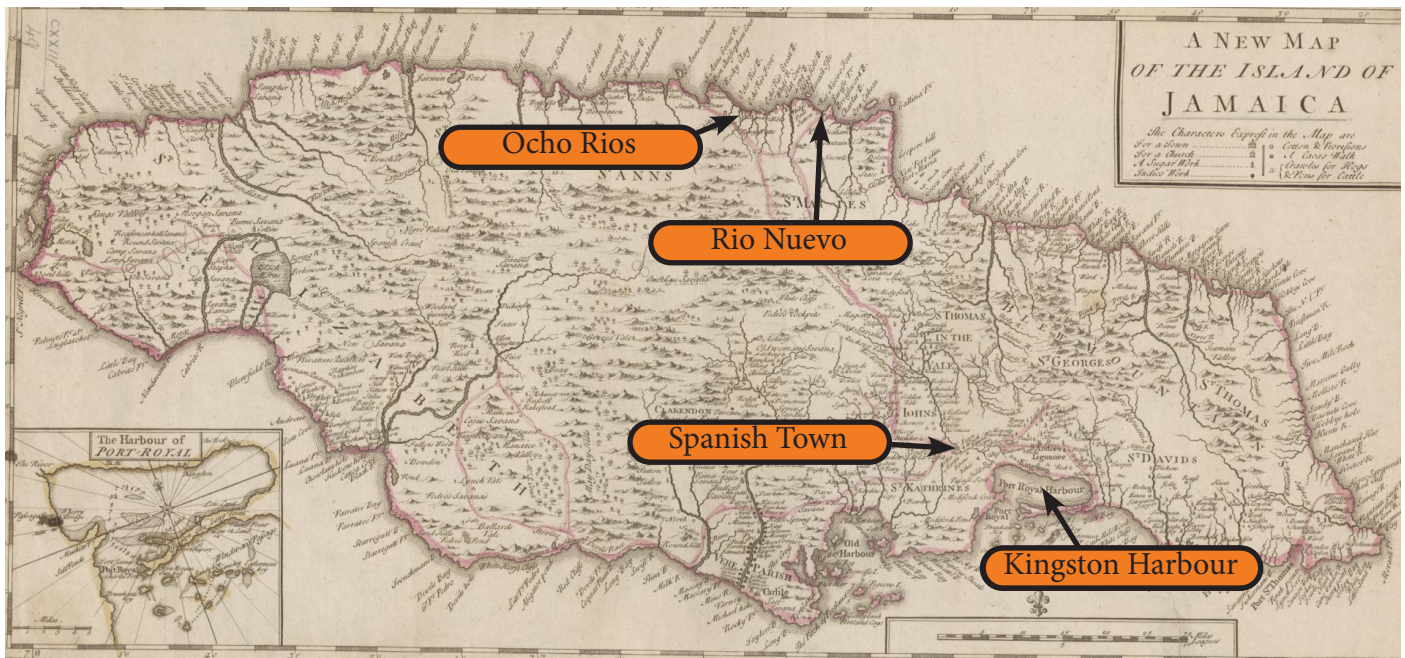
With over 3,000 men recruited in the Caribbean, Penn and Venables felt that they could now attack the Spanish. However, the men were poorly trained and ill-disciplined, and those recruited in the Caribbean were described as "*the very scum of scum*" by one eyewitness. It was decided that Hispaniola, the then most important island in the Spanish Caribbean, would be the first target. The objective was to capture its capital, San Domingo, which held additional significance for the English as Sir Francis Drake had successfully captured the city and ransomed it back to the Spanish over 70 years previously. Problems began almost immediately upon arrival, as heavy surf prevented the English landing near the city at the mouth of the River Jaina and they were forced to move westward to the mouth of the River Nizao, where they landed on 14th April 1655.

The Army was thus required to make a difficult three-day march through the jungle to reach San Domingo, having to endure great heat, humidity and a lack of water. Many fell ill on the march from dehydration or disease, including General Venables

himself who contracted dysentery. When they finally drew near to the city, they fell prey to a Spanish ambush and only escaped thanks to the efforts of a regiment composed of sailors. Thus, they fell back towards their landing site to recuperate as best as they were able and prepared for another attack. For the men left ashore, this meant minimal supplies and shelter. Another attack was launched on 25th April, now supported by bombardment from the fleet. However, the ships were too far out to sea for the bombardment to be effective, whilst the landward force was again ambushed and rescued by the sailors' regiment.



Having met with failure on Hispaniola, as well as the loss of well over 1,000 men through both fighting and disease, the commanders decided on a new target, an insignificant, poorly defended nearby island - Jamaica. They departed Hispaniola on 5th May 1655 and arrived at Jamaica, at what would later become Kingston Harbour, on the 10th. The Spanish defenders, seeing the superior English numbers, opted not to offer much resistance and retreated towards the island's capital of Santiago de la Vega, now known as Spanish Town. They decided to surrender to the English, and the latter's commanders offered them time to negotiate terms. The Spanish used this time wisely, transporting their most valuable possessions off the island, as well as setting their livestock free so that they could not be easily claimed by the English. They also liberated their slaves, asking them to attack the English in future, a request with which the freedmen generally complied. These former slaves fled to the hills, where they joined with others who had escaped the Spanish, as well as some of the native inhabitants of Jamaica; in time these groups formed the Maroon culture.



Despite having only captured one island, and not one that they had actually been directed to capture, Penn and Venables decided to return home, setting sail on 24th May in separate ships. On their arrival, they were both imprisoned in the Tower of London, charged with deserting their posts and cowardice. The majority of the men who had served with them were, however, left behind on Jamaica, where they became the first English settlers on the island. Life proved tough, as the commissioners, who were left to oversee the new colony, prevented the soldiers from looting the former Spanish settlements or shooting the livestock the Spanish had left behind. They were even prevented, on pain of death, from travelling more than half a mile from their quarters to search for food. This was to ensure that the Spanish plantations would be kept intact for the next wave of colonists that were envisioned, but it meant that famine swept through the poorly-supplied Army. This, coupled with the widespread disease that was sweeping through the ranks, led to many deaths, a problem exacerbated by the former Spanish slaves picking off some of their numbers. It is estimated that over two thirds of the Army on Jamaica died within the first ten months.

However, those that survived were eventually joined by reinforcements and more colonists from England and the existing English Caribbean colonies. Some of the men also settled upon other islands, with two deserters, with the surnames Watler and Bodden, choosing to settle on the uninhabited Cayman Islands, where their descendants still live today. The Spanish made two unsuccessful attempts to recapture Jamaica, using troops sent from Cuba under the command of the former Spanish Governor of Jamaica, Don Christobal Arnaldo de Isassi, which led to battles on Jamaican soil at Ocho Rios in 1657 and Rio Nuevo in 1658. The war with the Spanish would continue until 1670 with the signing of the Treaty of Madrid, which recognised English sovereignty over both Jamaica and the Cayman Islands.