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'THE GREAT DESIGN WHICH DOETH PROMISE SO MUCH HAPPINESS': NEWSBOOKS AND ENGLISH EXPEDITION TO THE WEST INDIES, 1654-1655

The year 1655 is of significance for the research on the history of England under the Protectorate, due to two important occurrences. In the spring, an attempt was made at attacking the Spanish lands in the Caribbean (so-called Western Design); early in the autumn, new legal solutions came into force, meant, among other things, to impose a military administration across the country and to tighten the censorship – thus exerting an essential impact on the functioning of the English press.

Since the former occurrence was followed by the latter a mere few months later, presumptions appeared that there might have possibly been an interrelation between the two. Or, to put it otherwise, the defeat of England's expedition in the West Indies, with the resulting appearance in the newsbooks, in the second half of September 1655, of critical commentaries on it, contributed to the imposition of the new restrictive rules which resultantly eliminated most of the period's newspapers from the marketplace.¹ However attractive, this statement seems to be not-quite-legitimate, and this for a number of reasons. Similarly, not-too-precise seems to be the image of how the newsbooks presented the course of the expedition, particularly at its early stages. This essay attempts at analysing the way newsbooks reported on the events in the Caribbean in order to find whether there could have actually been any relation occurring between the way it was done and the authorities' decision to strain the censorship.

¹ Nicole Greenspan, 'News and Politics of Information in the Mid-Seventeenth Century: the Western Design and the Conquest of Jamaica', *History Workshop Journal*, lxxix (2010), 13-14; *eadem*, *Selling Cromwell's Wars: Media, Empire and Godly Warfare, 1650-1658* (London, 2011), 86-7.

There is no doubt that the way the newsbooks – i.e. periodical news publications released in England since 1641² – wrote of an event as eminent from the standpoint of Cromwell and his associates as the attack on the Spanish possessions in the West Indies, was of importance to them. It was during the civil wars period that news publications had become an important propaganda instrument for both sides of the conflict. In the subsequent decade, the Republic authorities and the Lord Protector continually used them to support their own designs and purposes,³ especially as due to their popularity and broad reach, newsbooks could potentially be read by those readers who were otherwise difficult to reach by the other media or propaganda actions, such as e.g. official governmental publications or official ceremonies.⁴

However, newsbooks publishers enjoyed a rather considerable freedom to act, even though certain official restrictions were imposed. It is a legitimate presumption that, in certain cases, the factor preventing them from taking actions which could have possibly provoked the authorities to tighten the control was of economic nature, since newsbooks were for them a source of significant and, importantly, regular profit.⁵ The publishers would often make use of independent sources of information, albeit when it came to foreign news, their close relations with the authorities – being the case with, for instance, *Mercurius Politicus* edited by Marchamont Needham – enabled

² Joad Raymond, *The Invention of the Newspaper: English Newsbooks, 1641–1649* (Oxford, 2005), 20f.; *idem*, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2003), 151–4.

³ *Idem*, 'The Newspaper, Public Opinion, and the Public Sphere in the Seventeenth Century', in *idem* (ed.), *News, Newspapers, and Society in Early Modern Britain* (London and Portland, 1999), 114; Jason Peacey, 'Cromwellian England: A Propaganda State?', *History*, xci (2006), 193ff.

⁴ Michael John Seymour, 'Pro-Government Propaganda in Interregnum England, 1649–1660', doctoral thesis, unpublished (Cambridge University, 1986), 3–33. Newsbooks gained popularity owing to the interest in political developments, aroused as early as in the 1620s, along with a relatively high literacy rate (particularly true for London) and an efficient system of distribution of press publications, both within and outside the capital city. Cf. David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1980), chpt. 3; Raymond, *The Invention of the Newspaper*, 238–53.

⁵ Seymour, 'Pro-Government Propaganda', 302–6.

to furnish the readers with a richer body of reports, e.g. based on diplomatic sources.⁶

In general, the early 1650s, especially after the closedown of the last royalist publications, saw the authorities show a remarkable degree of tolerance for the publishers' doings – also in case that a newsbook content proved unwelcome to the government. Interventions on the part of the government occurred, however, only occasionally, most frequently in the form of promoting a specified version of incidents or, in some extreme cases, taking legal action against individual publishers – usually without any serious aftermath, though.⁷

Why, then, the almost complete ban on the release of newsbooks should have come out as a response to the publication of awkward news regarding the course of the Western Design project? Had there surfaced any earlier signals suggesting the authorities' discontent with the way the newsbooks informed on the West Indies occurrences? Replies to these questions are traceable in the reports on the developments related to the progress of the project, starting with December 1654 – the moment the forces commanded by Admiral William Penn and General Robert Venables left England to deliver the order to attack Spain's colonies in the West Indies,⁸ and then on

⁶ *Ibidem*, 328; Joseph Frank, *The Beginnings of the English Newspaper, 1620–1660* (Cambridge MA, 1961), 207, 245; Raymond, 'The Newspaper', 125.

⁷ Seymour, 'Pro-Government Propaganda', 404.

⁸ The plan for the attack was considered in England at least from the moment it became clear that the war with the United Provinces should soon be put an end to. The final decisions were undertaken, following a series of discussions, late in the summer of 1654. The origins of the venture in question have been discussed by several authors whose attempts tend to focus on the economic, strategic and religious issues. Cromwell is said, on the one hand, to have counted on measurable trade-related and financial advantages the expedition was expected to bring about, along with paving the way to restart a Protestant colonisation in the Caribbean; on the other hand, the idea was to be a pertinent blow on a sensitive spot of Spain, the eternal (since Elizabeth I's time) opponent of England, which suffered a severe situation then. Cf. Charles P. Korr, *Cromwell and the New Model Foreign Policy: England's Policy toward France, 1649–1658* (Berkeley, 1975), 114–16, 132–47; Timothy Venning, 'Cromwell's Foreign Policy and the Western Design', *Cromwelliana* (1994), 41–52; Barry Coward, *The Cromwellian Protectorate* (Manchester, 2002), 132; John H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven and London, 2006), 112–13; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, 'Errand to the Indies: Puritan Colonization from Providence Island through the Western Design', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., xlv, 1 (1988), 96ff.

unsuccessfully embarked, in April 1655, on subduing Hispaniola; the final point being the conquest, in the following month, of Jamaica and the commenced colonisation of the island.⁹

Already the earliest reports show that the newsbooks very soon started informing their readers about the venture, in a rather detailed fashion.¹⁰ Although the authorities did not announce publically the start of this, the press took notice of it: as early as in mid-December 1654, its readers were notified of the preparations being made for the sail-out, the number of soldiers and their commanders' names. The *Perfect Account* and the *Weekly Post*, for that matter, reported in a detailed manner on the incidents occurring as the subsequent squadrons were setting off on the sea, and published summarised addresses the commanders delivered to their subordinates a moment before the departure.¹¹

Similarly, even though some newsbook publishers did not write of the purpose behind the expedition, or announced they could not, for the time being, reveal such information, hoping that it would be given in relatively soon, several periodicals clearly indicated that West Indies were the purpose. Such was the case with the *Weekly Intelligencer*, *Weekly Post* or *Perfect Account*. Richard Collings, the *Weekly Intelligencer* editor, presented this information as part of a summary of the topics-of-the-week, mentioning 'The advance of the English Fleet under Gen. Pen[n] towards the West Indies' as a major one.¹²

⁹ For a summary of the related basic sources, see Adolphus William Ward *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge Modern History*, iv (Cambridge, 1906), 481–2. For a discussion of the progress of the expedition, see e.g. Stanley Arthur Goodwin Taylor, *The Western Design: An Account of Cromwell's Expedition to the Caribbean* (Kingston, 1965).

¹⁰ Cf. Greenspan, 'News and Politics', 4–5. On discussing the way the newsbooks presented the progress of the expedition, Nicole Greenspan argues that the authorities managed to prevent information on the expedition's purpose from getting publicised; suppositions that the Spanish possessions might be at stake first appeared in the press only in late January 1655. Similarly, Greenspan believes that this peculiar information embargo was extended to the subsequent months.

¹¹ *Perfect Diurnall of Some Passages and Preceedings Of, and in relation to the Armies* (N&S [see fn. 12], 503) (hereafter: *Perfect Diurnall*), no. 262, 11–18 Dec. 1654, p. 4026; *ibidem*, no. 264, 25 Dec.–1 Jan. 1654/5, p. 4048; *Weekly Post* (N&S, 688), no. 264, 26 Dec.–2 Jan. 1654/5, p. 4050.

¹² *Weekly Intelligencer of the Common-Wealth* (N&S 688) (hereafter: *Weekly Intelligencer*), no. 272, 26 Dec.–2 Jan. 1655, p. 1545, 158 [sic!]. The pagination and

The Weekly Post and *The Perfect Account*, in turn, concluded their account of the sail-out by stating that the ships 'are now designed for the Cuby Island near Barbados in the West Indies, where the general Randevouz is to be'.¹³ Almost all the newspapers notifying of the start of the expedition highlighted that it was accompanied by advantageous winds, which was perceived as a sign of God's favour toward the venture.¹⁴

Also, despatches published by newsbooks over the following weeks unambiguously confirmed that the English Armada was indeed crossing the Atlantic Ocean, moving toward the Caribbean. These consisted, in most cases, of reports conveyed by ships passing by the English squadrons – for instance, in the vicinity of the Canary Islands – or even letters from members of the English ships' crews. The usual message was that the journey went on without any disturbances; some reports confirmed that Barbados was their destination.¹⁵ This same period brought along more news on the responses the English authorities' venture came across in other countries, especially, in France. Late January 1655 saw *Mercurius Politicus*, *Weekly Intelligencer* as well as *Severall Proceedings* report that in Paris it was more and

the numbering applied to the title were usually inconsistent and chaotic, if used at all. The numbers quoted in these footnotes follow: Carolyne W. Nelson and Matthew Seccombe, *British Newspapers and Periodicals, 1641–1700* (New York, 1987) (abbreviated as N&S), the pagination being given after its original form. For the other periodicals whose pagination appeared problematic, the same method has been used, the N&S numbers being quoted in square parentheses.

¹³ *Weekly Post*, no. 264, 26 Dec.–2 Jan. 1654/5, p. 4050; also: *Perfect Account of the Daily Intelligence* (N&S, 496) (hereafter: *Perfect Account*), no. 208, 27 Dec.–3 Jan. 1654/5, p. 1659.

¹⁴ Cf. e.g.: *Mercurius politicus. Comprising the summ of all intelligence* (N&S, 361) (hereafter: *Mercurius Politicus*), no. 237, 21–28 Dec. 1654, p. 5018.

¹⁵ The letter sent by Admiral Penn fleet sailors, dated 29 Dec., appeared twice in the subsequent numbers of *Certain Passages of Every dayes Intelligence* (N&S, 427) (hereafter: *Certain Passages*), no. 212, 5–12 Jan. 1655, pp. 154, 213; 12–19 Jan. 1655, p. 152. Cf. *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 274, 9–17 Jan. 1655, p. 764 [sic!]; *Perfect Diurnall*, no. 265, 1–8 Jan. 1655, p. 4073; *Certain Passages*, no. 214, 19–26 Jan. 1655, p. 159. In early February, *Weekly Intelligencer* reported on an English ship having come across the Penn fleet on the Atlantic of 10 Jan., right after it passed by the Canary Islands, sailing directly toward the West Indies. If the news appearing in France are to be trusted, the fleet apparently sailed southwards, to encounter the valuable silver and gold mines, whose seizure ought not to have caused a conflict with Spain; *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 277, 30 Jan.–6 Feb. 1655, p. 986.

more spoken of the English fleet intending to attack the Spanish possessions in the New World, the most plausible target being Mexico, with its gold and silver mines.¹⁶

Late in February, Richard Collings finally published the confirmed news on the landing on Barbados where the ships and the people awaited extra supplies and wherefrom, as he wrote, 'then they will off to sea again on the great design which doeth promise so much happiness'.¹⁷ The *Perfect Account*, for a change, informed in the middle of the month that the fleet had departed from the island some time before; in the first days of March, it was added that although no news had been received on the English forces' actions, nonetheless 'it is conceived, that by this time they have accomplished some very notable achievement, to the great amazement of the Indies and the honour and profit of the English Nation'.¹⁸

The discrepancies between the contents of reports appearing in individual newspapers might have ensued from their use of various sources and/or from communication problems – news from the Caribbean were received quite irregularly and with considerable delays. This does not change the fact that the message was clear and the readers were expected to have no more doubts as to the purpose and character of the English fleet's voyage. Their curiosity was however put to a serious test as during several following months the newsbooks remained tacit on what was happening with the fleet, or quoted messages, mostly unverified, concerning its doings, some of which were thereafter contradicted or negated by the subsequent pieces of information.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 241, 18–25 Jan. 1655, p. 5082: '[The fleet] is designed to make some attempt upon the territories of the King of Spain'; also *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 276, 23–30 Jan. 1655, p. 163; *Severall Proceedings of State Affaires* (N&S, 599) (hereafter: *Severall Proceedings*), no. 279, 25 Jan.–1 Feb. 1654/5, p. 4423.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, no. 280, 20–27 Feb. 1655, p. 231.

¹⁸ *Perfect Account*, no. 217, 28 Feb.–7 March 1655, p. 1736.

¹⁹ For instance, in late March, *Weekly Intelligencer* informed that, having departed from Barbados, the fleet stopped for two days at Montserrat, and subsequently set out 'again to discover those parts of the Indies where are more profits and more pleasure'. One of the subsequent issues of this newsbook shared the presumption that the ships and the soldiers might actually have remained on Barbados, getting prepared to further action and awaiting reinforcement to come over; plus, it mentioned the rumours having it that an attack had been delivered on some not-quite-defined areas; *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 284, 20–27 March 1655, p. 438; no. 286, 3–10 April 1655, p. 433.

Confirmed despatches on the situation in the West Indies started appearing in print again only in mid-May. They clearly indicated that the English had most probably by then commenced their military operations, aimed almost certainly against the Spanish. Apart from being able to base its report upon the letters of Admiral William Penn himself, the expeditor commander, *Weekly Post* quoted in detail the size and strength of the English forces, described their armament and confirmed that the fleet had finally left Barbados on 26 March.²⁰ Within the same week, *Weekly Intelligencer* quoted, in turn, officers' letters describing the fleet's sojourn on the island. The letters said that although additional conscription had been carried out successfully, with the locals willingly assisting the Englishmen, problems with weaponry and supplies nonetheless appeared, with everyone impatiently awaiting belated deliveries so they could at last set off to the sea.²¹ Referring to the testimony of an officer who had returned to England in order to watch over further reinforcement and requisite provisions, *Perfect Account* informed that the English ships were moving from one place to the other, with the locals in the subsequently-encountered terrains sparing no admiration for 'the English invincible Armad'; however, 'the Design lies further off, and not at any place already alarmed'.²²

These symptoms suggested that the newsbook readers might soon come across detailed accounts on the course of the English military action in the West Indies. Much earlier on, in January, Collings forecasted that, by all indications, mid-June should see the first ascertained messages on this topic.²³

Thus, it ought not to be surprising that the public opinion's interest in the excursion's progress was constantly growing. In the 3 July issue, the *Weekly Intelligencer* publisher even found that 'These times have made us all Cosmographers. ... Our hearts, and our thoughts are now as busie on the West Indies as they were before on the English map [i.e. during the war]'.²⁴ Collings reassured his

²⁰ *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. [226], 8–15 May 1655, pp. 1802–3.

²¹ *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 291, 8–15 May 1655, pp. 2–3.

²² *Perfect Account*, no. 229, 23–30 May 1655, p. 1832.

²³ *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 276, 23–30 Jan. 1655, p. 163; *ibidem*, no. 295, 5–12 June 1655, p. 22.

²⁴ *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 298, 25 June–3 July 1655, p. 22.

readers he had made efforts to seek reliable information on how the West Indies project unfolded, but without much success, be it with letters to English merchants or extraordinary despatches from France, Spain and Holland.²⁵

The publishers who had sought other sources with success, primarily informed about the English conquest of Hispaniola, with some of them making references to reports of alleged witnesses. According to the accounts of individuals having just returned home from Virginia, as presented by *Perfect Account*, the colony has been visited by a ship whose crew confirmed that the English troops had conquered Santo Domingo, following a short siege, and the English banner was seen fluttering on the local castle's walls.²⁶ Moreover, *Severall Proceedings* reported that the letters from Spain most recently received by London merchants mentioned that the Spaniards had fled to Cuba and into the continent once Hispaniola was taken over by the English fleet.²⁷

The first piece of information implying that the actual progress of events could have been different came out in the first days of July, as instead of a success, the *Weekly Intelligencer* notified, in its summary of the weekly reports, of 'The great and cruel fight betwixt the English and the Spanish before the wals of Domingo, and in the Narrow Sea betwixt Hispaniola, and Cuba' and announced it would give the names of nearly sixty army officers killed in the battle on both sides.²⁸

This brief passage, whilst not telling anything about a defeat of the English expedition, unambiguously indicated that Europe and England started receiving news showing its progress in a different light, or at least calling the earlier reports into question. To verify either was temporarily impossible as no accounts had thitherto been received from any commander or participant of the expedition.

Perfect Account explained the lack of such news by adverse weather conditions; the fact is, though, that both Admiral Penn and General Venables delayed notifying on the failure of their mission, resolving to send to England the first reports on their actions

²⁵ As he confessed, 'I have laboured much in the inquiry'; *ibidem*.

²⁶ In addition, letters from St Christopher were referred to, and the readers were offered a description of Santo Domingo, mentioning a potent castle and five monasteries; *Perfect Account*, no. 234, 27 June–4 July 1655, p. 1866.

²⁷ *Severall Proceedings*, no. 300, 21–8 June 1655, pp. 4762, 4767.

²⁸ *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 299, 3–10 July 1655, p. 28.

only in the first days of June, that is, some time after Jamaica was captured.²⁹

The news on the failed operation in Hispaniola reached London on 24 July and certainly got commonly known very soon after,³⁰ with some help of the newsbooks which had it instantly published. This is true also for Marchmont Nedham's *Politician*, unmistakably associated with the authorities; yet, as it remarked that the reports came from the governor of Barbados, rather than the expedition commanders, their reliability could be somewhat doubtful.³¹ There is thus nothing to suggest that the authorities took any action to prevent the news proving unfavourable for them from being publicised; even if such an action was taken (which, given the news being published by *Politician*, does not seem to be much plausible), it turned out completely inefficient.³²

Most of the accounts and reports were coincident in content: they implied that the English forces, grouped into smaller clusters, had landed on the island but considerably far off from its capital and were in effect forced to undertake an arduous march toward the town. As they marched on, they were entrapped by the enemy, with General James Haynes, one of the commanders, getting killed, along with other officers and soldiers; as more English troops appeared, the Spanish eventually decided to retreat. Losses were mentioned too, with a remark that their exact volume was unknown; but e.g. *Severall Proceedings* declared it should refrain from reporting on the developments until it could receive direct accounts.³³

The despatches received did not actually clearly confirm that a defeat occurred; as some newsbooks informed, e.g., that the English had managed to capture three Spanish forts, or heralded that the army

²⁹ *Perfect Account*, no. 235, 4–11 July 1655, p. 1880; Thomas Birch (ed.), *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe*, iii (London, 1742), 509–11.

³⁰ The news on the unsuccessful attack on Hispaniola was commonly known, and was debated in Essex in the first days of August; see Alan Macfarlane (ed.), *The Diary of Ralph Josselin, 1616–1683* (Records of Social and Economic History, New Series, 3, London, 1991), 350.

³¹ *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 267, 19–26 July 1655, p. 5500.

³² Cf. Greenspan, *Selling Cromwell's Wars*, 84.

³³ 'Many things are spoken, but touching the number of slain, or their staying in that Island, or removing, or any other particulars, I shall not presume to give you any account, until further letters come from the Fleet themselves'; *Severall Proceedings*, no. 304, 19–26 July 1655, p. 4830.

would most certainly resume its attack on the capital.³⁴ Yet, they indicated, rather clearly, that the main goals of this expedition had been missed, and the project could not conclusively be regarded a success.

The last days of July saw the newsbooks basically repeat their earlier reports, adding certain new details this time. *Politicus* and *Certain Passages* notified that General Haynes's son, in spite of his young age and small experience, managed, together with his troop, to snatch his father's dead body from the Spaniards.³⁵ *Weekly Intelligencer* was the only newsbook to make a step forward, commenting on the Hispaniola defeat in a broader context by observing that

It seems the possession of Hispaniola, Cuba, and Mexico is like to be a work of a longer date than at first we propounded to ourselves, when we thought that *Veni, Vidi, Vici* would have done it.

At the same time, he reported that Jamaica had been seized.³⁶ The news that the island had been subdued prevailed in the subsequent accounts from the Caribbean. Also, it initiated a deliberate action of the authorities, whose purpose was twofold: to give grounds for the earlier military failure and to make an impression whereby Jamaica was to be, in principle, more valuable an acquisition than Hispaniola.³⁷

This undertaking turned out to be rather efficient, probably owing, in the first place, to the difficulty of duly verifying the incoming news, and to the fact that publishers, in their will to publish current information, were forced to use materials given or suggested to them by the authorities, and almost certainly produced by the Secretary of State's office. Yet, such materials were very often provided to them in a truncated version, compared to the original, or were edited by the publishers appropriately. When comparing Venables's letters to John Thurloe, Secretary of State, and the report by an officer named Daniell, as preserved in the *Thurloe State Papers*, against the reports

³⁴ *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 302, 24–31 July 1655, p. 35; *Perfect Diurnall*, no. 295, 23–30 July 1655, p. 4532.

³⁵ *Certain Passages*, no. 309, 27 July–3 Aug. 1655, p. 32; *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 268, 26 July–2 Aug. 1655, p. 5516.

³⁶ *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 303, 31 July–7 Aug. 1655, p. 31; *Certain Passages* published the same statement a few days later, in its no. 310, 3–10 Aug. 1655, p. 31.

³⁷ Greenspan, *Selling Cromwell's Wars*, 84.

based thereupon published in various newsbooks in early August, one clearly finds that the latter tend to omit, to a considerable extent, certain unwelcome details – for example, the real amount of losses incurred, or complete lack of logistical preparation for the attack on Santo Domingo.³⁸

The authorities' action proved efficient even with publishers such as Richard Collings, of whom considerable carefulness and determination in acquiring reliable information had been characteristic, and who often made use of other sources than the other periodicals did.³⁹ This time, however, the message he offered proved to be compliant, to a notable extent, with the accounts appearing in the other newsbooks, focusing on aspects being key, from the authorities' standpoint, for the way the expedition was presented to the public opinion.

The first such aspect was giving excuse for the failed military action in Hispaniola. Referring to the arguments presented by General Venables, the newsbooks identified several reasons for the failure – one of them being the guide having turned up late, a factor apparently responsible for the English troops landing too far from the city. Other such reasons would be scarcity of potable water and excessive consumption of the local fruit by the soldiers, with the resulting bloody flux affecting most of them; others still would include tiredness with the journey and the subsequent several days' marching in tough conditions. As a result, the English forces were not capable of resisting the Spaniards, once they ran into the ambush the enemy has laid. Their situation was made worse still as one of the commanders, General Jackson, had fled from the battlefield.⁴⁰

In September – the expedition commanders having already returned home and submitted their report to the Lord Protector and his Council, with the reasons behind the failure making the headlines again – *Certain Passages* and *Perfect Account* went as far as stating that the defeat had resulted from a treason of the Irish who were said to

³⁸ Birch, *A Collection of the State Papers*, 504–8, 509–11; cf. Joad Raymond, "A Mercury with a Winged Conscience": Marchamont Nedham, Monopoly and Censorship', *Media History*, iv, 1 (1998), 10.

³⁹ Frank, *The Beginnings*, 238.

⁴⁰ *Severall Proceedings*, no. 306, 2–9 Aug. 1655, p. 4861; *Perfect Diurnall*, no. 295, 30 July–6 Aug. 1655, p. 4548; *ibidem*, no. 296, 6–13 Aug. 1655, p. 4558; *Faithfull Scout*, no. 237, 20–27 July 1655, p. 1893; *Certain Passages*, no. 310, 3–10 Aug. 1655, p. 32; *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 269, 2–9 Aug. 1655, p. 5531.

have warned the Spanish of the approaching attack, thus enabling them to get adequately prepared.⁴¹

The size of the losses incurred as part of the failed operation was a separate story. Most of the papers mentioned two to three hundred casualties, emphasising that only a part of those soldiers had been killed in fighting while the others fell victim to sicknesses affecting them on the march.⁴² *Politicus* made attempts at disowning the despatches, said to be circulating across the continent, which spoke of three thousand killed on the English side; it went as far as suggesting that it was the royalists that were behind it.⁴³

The newsbooks offered much more space to the other issue of importance to the authorities: the attempt to efface the bad impression triggered by the Santo Domingo defeat, through showing a positive image of Jamaica. This island, which, logically, was a sort of a 'consolation prize' from the standpoint of England, started being presented as a much more valuable asset compared to Hispaniola. To give an example, *Severall Proceedings* informed in the first week of August that: 'This Island is full of provisions and cattell, and as they write, better aire then Hispaniola, and of more advantages for all purposes then that'.⁴⁴ All the other periodicals, virtually, spoke in the same vein.⁴⁵

The main focus was on the island's riches. The newsbooks, in their definite majority, each published several despatches praising

⁴¹ *Certain Passages*, no. 403, 14–21 Sept. 1655, p. 27; *Perfect Account*, no. 245, 12–19 Sept. 1655, p. 1960.

⁴² *Severall Proceedings*, no. 306, 2–9 Aug. 1655, p. 4861; *Perfect Diurnall*, no. 295, 30 July–6 Aug. 1655, p. 4548; *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 269, 2–9 Aug. 1655, p. 5531.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, no. 270, 9–16 Aug. 1655, p. 5540; also, *ibidem*, no. 271, 16–23 Aug. 1655, pp. 5556–61.

⁴⁴ *Severall Proceedings*, no. 306, 2–9 Aug. 1655, p. 4862; *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 270, 9–16 Aug. 1655, p. 5548.

⁴⁵ *Certain Passages* described Jamaica as 'equal, if not superior to Hispaniola'; *ibidem*, no. 310, 3–10 Aug. 1655, p. 32; also: *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 270, 9–16 Aug. 1655, p. 5548. A number of publishers decided to make their readers better aware of the history of Jamaica and to more precisely determine its location (the latter attempt did not prove thoroughly successful) – e.g. some periodicals presented Jamaica as a part of Hispaniola; cf. *Faithfull Scout*, 223 [239], 3–10 Aug. 1655, p. 1918; *Certain Passages*, no. 310, 3–10 Aug. 1655, p. 31; whereas *Weekly Intelligencer* compared the situation of both islands to the one of the Wright island as versus England; *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 303, 31 July–7 Aug. 1655, p. 31.

its fertile soils, excellent husbandry conditions, abundant flora, as well as a number of other natural resources of value. Jamaica was referred to, in a few such accounts, as ‘the granary of the neighbour islands’, or even, ‘goodly fertile and improvable for the interest of Commonwealth’.⁴⁶ Several other reports mentioned impressive quantity of cattle and the number of horses caught by the English; diverse plants appearing commonly on the island were said to yield valuable spices (e.g. the nutmeg tree [*Myristica fragrans*]), among other things; the local tobacco was of exquisite quality; local silver and gold mines were found operational. *Politicus* and *Certain Passages* also mentioned the appearance in Jamaica of considerable deposits of sulphur, the raw material indispensable in gunpowder production.⁴⁷ *Weekly Intelligencer*, on its part, expressed a belief that those riches, now taken over, ‘do promise to advance the honor of the English Nation’.⁴⁸

The climax of those actions was, in early days of September, the almost parallel publication by several newsbooks – incl. *Politicus*, *Weekly Intelligencer*, *Weekly Post* and *Faithfull Scout* – of an extremely detailed report from the island, running several pages and listing, for that matter, valuable types of timber, spice and luxury foodstuff goods.⁴⁹ Given the fact that this same text has been preserved among the Secretary-of-State sources, it would be legitimate to presume that this might have been the source for newsbook editors – at least for some of them.⁵⁰

In order to solidify, reinforce and secure the English rule of the island, it was necessary to undertake a colonisation action, which rather soon rose to become one of the number-one issues touched upon by reports coming from the West Indies.⁵¹ The action’s progress was obviously described by newsbooks, reporting, for instance,

⁴⁶ *Perfect Diurnall*, no. 301, 10–17 Sept. 1655, pp. 4629–30.

⁴⁷ *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 269, 2–9 Aug. 1655, p. 5531; *Certain Passages*, no. 310, 3–10 Aug. 1655, p. 33.

⁴⁸ *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 305, 14–21 Aug. 1655, p. 1.

⁴⁹ *Faithfull Scout*, no. 243, 1–8 Sept. 1655, p. 1935 [sic!]; *Weekly Post*, no. 242, 4–12 Sept. 1655, pp. 1938–9; *ibidem*, no. 308, 4–11 Sept. 1655, p. 26–5 [sic!]. One could learn, for instance, that Jamaica yields ‘Cocao in great plenty, of which they make chocolatto sold ordinarily for three shillings per bushel’.

⁵⁰ Birch, *A Collection of State Papers*, 545–7.

⁵¹ *Politicus* found that the island’s development only called for extra settlers, the venture’s financial resource having been excellently supplied; *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 269, 2–9 Aug. 1655, p. 5531.

that the first settlers 'do enlarge their quarters in that Island, and have all things plenty'; also, large-scale works on fortifications being prepared in case Spain endeavoured to regain the island were covered.⁵² *Politicus* mentioned the colonisers' decision to settle on the island for good, alongside the authorities' endeavours to provide them with any indispensable assistance and support.⁵³ A few titles heralded a consecutive arrival of new dwellers, including some members of families of the soldiers who had contributed to the seizure of the island, expressing a conviction that

having so good an island as Jamaica ready to receive, and refresh them after a long journey, they will prefer the flowers, and sweet fruits of that warm climate before the snow and ice that is in cold countries.⁵⁴

Much attention was also devoted to initiatives undertaken at home to intensify the settlement action involving exponents of various milieus. A few newsbooks would announce, for instance, that numerous 'noblemen, gentlemen, and merchants', some five hundred people altogether, were involved in the colonisation action. *Perfect Account* described an undertaking of London merchants who, counting on profits potentially yieldable by access to the Jamaican riches, offered to arrange, at their own cost and expense, transport and supply facilities for as many people as might be necessary to develop and protect the island.⁵⁵ *Weekly Intelligencer's* report saying that a new service was made available enabling to send letters and other pieces of mail to the area of the new plantations in the Caribbean, via the newly-established Office of Adresses for West-Indies, certainly suggested that the settlement action was to remain permanent.⁵⁶

Newsbooks also dealt with everyday realities of the life on the island, which sometimes appeared rather tough. Even if the difficulties

⁵² *Severall Proceedings*, no. 308, 16–23 Aug. 1655, p. 4891; *Perfect Account*, 1–8 Aug. 1655, p. 1928; *ibidem*, 15–22 Aug. 1655, p. 1929.

⁵³ *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 270, 9–16 Aug. 1655, p. 5548.

⁵⁴ *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 306, 21–28 Aug. 1655, p. 3; also: *Perfect Diurnall*, no. 301, 10–17 Sept. 1655, pp. 4629–30. *Certain Passages*, no. 401, 31 Aug.–7 Sept. 1655, p. 6.

⁵⁵ *Perfect Account*, no. 243, 29 Aug.–5 Sept. 1655, p. 1937.

⁵⁶ *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 308, 18–25 Sept. 1655, p. 39. The office was located 'At the Phaenix in Seething lane'; the service was charged 3 pennies, at which fee a letter could be sent 'to any of the several plantations' in the Caribbean.

the settlers had to tackle were described, they were in most cases shown in a way implying their temporary nature, or excuses were identified for why such difficulties appeared. In late August, *Certain Passages* wrote that the main reason for the Englishmen's deaths was high dysentery morbidity caused by their hasty consumption of excessive amounts of fruit and, not quite identifiable, 'other sweet things which that country affords'.⁵⁷ *Weekly Post* mentioned, for a change, problems with pro-Spanish partisan warfare making the settlers' and soldiers' activities difficult – hastening to add that they have already learned how to efficiently manage the attacks.⁵⁸

Also *Politicus* confirmed that some difficulties have indeed occurred. Quoting General Venables's letter to the Secretary of State, it informed on problems with provisioning, appearing along with a few other issues for which the authorities would have to make certain decisions of material importance to resolve them.⁵⁹ There is no doubt, though, that Nedham published the said letter reedited, offering the readers a version essentially altering its message (to give an example, the fragment pointing out to a low morale among the soldiers was deleted).⁶⁰ Let us add that this same modified text reappeared afterwards in *Perfect Diurnall* and the aforementioned minute description of Jamaican wealth was used by publishers of several other periodicals.⁶¹

This reconfirms that the action aimed at creating a positive image of the expedition consisted not as much in an information embargo as in rendering available to publishers materials which comprised, in the first place, contents proving welcome from the authorities' standpoint. There is no doubt, either, that external observers could grasp the point. Giovanni Sagredo, a Venetian resident in London, notified his principals, as of 24 September, that although the commanders have returned to England, which

⁵⁷ *Certain Passages*, no. 312, 24–31 Aug. 1655, p. 54.

⁵⁸ *Weekly Post*, no. 241, 21–28 Aug. 1655, p. 1922.

⁵⁹ *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 273, 29 Aug.–6 Sept. 1655, p. 5593.

⁶⁰ Cf. Greenspan, *Selling Cromwell's Wars*, 83–4, Birch, *A Collection of the State Papers*, 545.

⁶¹ *Perfect Diurnall*, no. 300, 3–10 Sept. 1655, p. 4614–18; *Weekly Post*, no. 242, 4–12 Sept. 1655, p. 1938; *Faithfull Scout*, no. 243, 1–8 Sept. 1655, p. 1935 [sic!].

has tended to cool their [the English's] hopes of conquest ..., the government publishes that the place captured is of great importance, and that they will prosecute their original plans with greater forces than ever.⁶²

Newsbook editors were probably aware of the fact that the authorities' knowledge on what was going on in the Caribbean might be more detailed than they were inclined to admit. Daniel Border, the *Weekly Post* and *Faithfull Scout* publisher, clearly stated that certain pieces of the news were regarded as 'not yet ready for the publick view';⁶³ still, these publishers resolved to make use of the reports provided by the authorities. The plausible reason is that limiting oneself to, and exclusively relying on, independent information channels could imply serious delays in getting the information published and extended periods of silence kept with regard to the developments in the West Indies – something that would certainly have not been well received by the readers. This would certainly not have been much of advantage to the ruling party either, and this is why they were probably ready to accept the occurrence of not-thoroughly-enthusiastic reports, while maintaining some control over their contents, rather than cutting the publishers off from information and risk that gossips and suppositions might get disseminated, provoked by the tacit press.⁶⁴

In the light of such attitude on the part of the authorities – which was, let us remind, quite typical, given the newsbooks conveying pieces of information being rather awkward for them – the concept whereby the appearance, in the latter half of September, of adverse comments criticising the whole design and describing the situation of the settlers in Jamaica as tragic, was the direct reason for imposing drastic restrictions upon the publishing market, seems definitely illegitimate.⁶⁵

⁶² 'Venice, Sept. 1655', *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice*, vol. 30: 1655–1656 (1930), 101–14. <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=89811>> [Accessed 12 Jan. 2012].

⁶³ *Weekly Post*, no. 240, 15–21 Aug. 1655, p. 1917.

⁶⁴ Seymour, *Pro-Government Propaganda*, 302, 326.

⁶⁵ Nicole Greenspan indicates 'the intensification of the negative coverage in the press at the end of September'; in a further perspective, official declaration of war against Spain was seen as 'motivating factors in tightening press regulations'; *eadem*, *Selling Cromwell's Wars*, 86–87; *eadem*, 'News and Politics', 14.

As a matter of fact, analysis of the period's reports has shown that although newsbooks did publish negative commentaries on the developments in the West Indies, such commentaries were never dominant – conversely, they appear to have been relatively small in number. Moreover, if anywhere, they were published by the titles whose critical attitude to the authorities' policy had been known long before then – just to name *The Faithfull Scout*. It was almost the only newsbook publishing overt criticisms of the course of the expedition and informing of the tragic situation suffered by the settlers in Jamaica due to 'meerly ... want of substance and provisions'.⁶⁶ Additionally, most of scarce comments of this type were presented in a very oblique form, albeit obviously plain to a number of readers. In mid-September, the said *Faithfull Scout* wrote, for instance, that 'to get some small profit with great danger is like that those that fish with a golden hook who hazards more than the fish is worth'.⁶⁷

It needs being noted, furthermore, that some of the comments interpretable as critical toward the authorities, and toward the Lord Protector in specific, or those making references to poor conditions the settlers faced and had to deal with, were not really so in each particular case. *Perfect Account* wrote, in the issue of 26 September, about 'those poore souls that were left at Iamaica', not in the context of comments criticising the expedition but in connection with reports on the mighty Spanish fleet having just sailed out for the West Indies in order to recoup the lost terrain.⁶⁸ Similarly, the allegedly critical comment stigmatising the way in which the expedition was carried out, published in the last issue of *Certain Passages*, referred primarily not to the actions taken by Cromwell himself but rather those of Penn and Venables, who were openly accused of not having come to a mutual agreement in the course of the voyage, and had recently been gaoled at the Tower, on the Council's order.⁶⁹ This incident, which unambiguously implied that the authorities were of negative opinion on their actions during the expedition, was covered by almost

⁶⁶ *Faithfull Scout*, no. 246, 21–28 Sept. 1655, p. 1699.

⁶⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, no. 245, 14–21 Sept. 1655, p. 1956.

⁶⁸ *Perfect Account*, no. 246, 19–26 Sept. 1655, p. 1968; cf. Greenspan, 'News and Politics', 13; *eadem*, *Selling Cromwell's Wars*, 86.

⁶⁹ *Certain Passages*, no. 404, 21–28 Sept. 1655, pp. 25–6. The publisher expected that the commanders would probably request for being released from detention, adding however that 'it is a little too soon yet'.

all the periodicals of the time, including those known for their pro-government attitude.⁷⁰

What is more, even though a given newsbook issue published somewhat critical accounts, it would often be accompanied by a passage, appearing a little further up, discussing the situation in Jamaica, or a military action taken earlier, in a positive light. This is well illustrated by the *Faithfull Scout* of 28 September (quoted a moment ago) where the charges posed against Venables appear alongside the information on a prize awarded by Philip IV to the governor of Hispaniola, with a comment suggesting that the time will show if the prize has really been well-earned – a remark that should no doubt be read as a herald of another attempt at conquering the island by England.⁷¹

As already mentioned, it was in the second half of September that – on the occasion of the expedition commanders' return to England – several newsbooks began anew giving grounds for the failed attempt to conquer Hispaniola and publishing enthusiastic descriptions of riches the subdued Jamaica yielded to England.⁷²

It has also to be borne in mind that information on failures on the various stages of the expedition had occurred long before. Early in August, *Weekly Post* plainly found that 'The West Indy Design goes not so well on as was expected; yet are the English ... resolv'd to keep their ground, or dispute it by inches'; also, 'sad and miserables papers' were mentioned, implying that the English party was incurring severe losses in its combat with the Spanish, their ships being exposed to peril, owing to the approaching hurricane season.⁷³ *Faithfull Scout* similarly suggested, in the same period, that it was not certain whether England could maintain Jamaica at all.⁷⁴ There is no

⁷⁰ Cf., e.g., *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 308, 18–25 Sept. 1655, p. 5. It is worth emphasising that *Mercurius Politicus* was the only newsbook to inform of the appointment of a special committee whose task was 'to examine the bussiness of the West-Indies'; *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 276, 20–27 Sept. 1655, p. 5642.

⁷¹ *Faithfull Scout*, no. 246, 21–28 Sept. 1655, p. 1699; this same information was given, the day before, by the pro-Government *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 276, 20–27 Sept. 1655, p. 5643.

⁷² There were among them periodicals publishing critical commentaries; cf. *Certain Passages*, no. 403, 14–21 Sept. 1655, p. 26.

⁷³ *Weekly Post*, no. 241, 21–28 Aug. 1655, p. 1928.

⁷⁴ 'The success whereof I shall leave to the test of time'; *Faithfull Scout*, no. 223, 3–10 Aug. 1655, p. 1920.

source-based confirmation, though, that any of these commentaries implied any response from the authorities.

There are other doubts appearing too. First, it should be considered why it was resolved that so many periodicals then in circulation be so drastically reduced (initially, down to one each in English and in French; October saw the appearance of another English-language title, the *Public Intelligencer*⁷⁵); this extended to those which throughout presented the Western Design in the way the authorities preferred it. It does not seem possible to give an unambiguous answer, but it is legitimate to guess that one underlying reason was the will to prepare the ground towards the political changes, pre-planned and launched in October, which, it was expected, could arouse very serious controversies.⁷⁶ Moreover, the authorities had for some time been trying, rather efficiently, to expand their new propaganda instruments; hence, the importance of newsbooks in winning the public opinion was gradually decreasing, from their standpoint.⁷⁷

The presumed association between the publication of news from the Caribbean, unfavourable to the authorities, and the toughened control of the press is additionally challenged based on the schedule of works on the new censorship rules.⁷⁸ These works were commenced in as early as spring 1655 (with the outcome of the West Indies design not being known yet) and intensified in August, the date a three-member committee was set up, tasked with developing the related detailed ordinances. It may not be precluded that the Caribbean defeat accelerated the moment this body emerged, but this was certainly not the main reason. Beside this, the committee concluded its work by the end of August, as on the 28 novel solutions were proclaimed due to enter into force twenty-eight days afterwards, i.e. in the late September.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Nelson and Seccombe, *British Newspapers*, 516f.

⁷⁶ Raymond, "A Mercury with a Winged Conscience", 7.

⁷⁷ Seymour, *Pro-Government Propaganda*, 318.

⁷⁸ Raymond, "A Mercury with a Winged Conscience", 7.

⁷⁹ *Orders of His Highnes the Lord Protector, made and published by and with the advice and consent of his council, for putting in speedy and due execution the laws, statutes and ordinances, made and provided against printing unlicensed and scandalous books and pamphlets, and for the further regulating of printing. Published by His Highness special command* (London, 1655); also vol. 100: Aug. 1655, *Calendar of State Papers Domestic: Interregnum, 1655* (1881), 267–312, <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=53535>> [Accessed 25 March 2012].

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, on 5 September the Council of State launched a decree banning publication in print of any news without prior consent from the Secretary of State – a decision directly targeted against newsbooks.⁸⁰ The said decision was reconfirmed as of 21 September. What it means is that the presumptive wave of criticism would have appeared in the newsbooks after it was resolved to impose a limit on the press market. Making a step further, it may be assumed that the publishers – especially, those adversely disposed toward the authorities – realised that their activities might be coming to an end; this, in turn, might have inclined them to assume a somewhat harsher tone and to publish critical comments in the last issues of their newsbooks.

To sum up, let us restate that the existing image of the way in which the English newsbooks presented the Western Design ought to be deemed imprecise, and only partly veritable. There are no serious premises, either, for recognising the scarce critical comments published on the situation in the West Indies in September 1655 as the main impulse for rendering the censorship severer toward the end of the month. Although the actual reasons behind this decision are not completely clear, the chronology of occurrences would suggest that the plans to introduce a military administration (Major-Generals) and a general reform of state operation formed a much more important driver.

There is no doubt, in turn, that the authorities in general, and Thurloe's secretariat in particular, were expeditious to take an action meant to neutralise the bad impression produced by the news on a failed attempt at conquering Hispaniola, effectively turning it into a successful action. This clearly confirms that Cromwell and his associates did recognise the propagandist significance of the press – not only in regard of domestic affairs but also in view of shedding 'appropriate' light on their foreign policies. This observation ought to prompt that a more complete analysis, hitherto neglected, be embarked on with respect to the newsbooks' reports regarding other related questions – such as, for instance, the Baltic policies, or England's relations and relationships with individual states.

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⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, 312–61, <<http://www.britishhistory.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=53536>> [Accessed 25 March 2012].