

A Sugar Plantation on Saint-Domingue in the Eighteenth-Century: White Attitudes Towards the Slave Trade

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Nicolas-Claude Provenchère arrived on Saint-Domingue in 1755. He was 19 years old. Born of a middle-class family from Orleans, Provenchère was related by marriage to Agnan de Fougeu, Croix de Saint-Louis, owner of two sugar plantations at Cul-de-Sac in the richest part of the island. Through this connection young Provenchère found employment as a *procurer-gérant*—no doubt first as an *économiste*—on Fougeu's *habitations*. Mobilized into the militia of the island during the Seven Years' War, a service which he hated, Provenchère returned to his preferred profession in 1763. The Fougeu plantations were now owned by the original owner's two daughters. Creole heiresses of sugar plantations had an incontestable appeal among Parisian noble families—one Fougeu daughter married Marechal de Conflans, a previous governor of the island, and the second daughter married Marquis de La Rochefoucauld-Bayers, an illustrious name. Provenchère was only 26 years old when he wrote the Marquis in the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

Enjoying the confidence of Madame la Maréchale and Madame her sister with respect to their business affairs in this colony, I find myself by the fact of your marriage to Mlle. Fougeu in charge of your affairs as well. It is in this quality, Monsieur, that I take the liberty of recommending myself to your favor.

Provenchère combined deference and professionalism with a certain parental familiarity, addressing the marquise as "madame et très chère cousine". For the next thirty years, Provenchère was never at a loss for tact and diplomacy, above all projecting the image of a professional estate manager, punctual, clear, exact, and zealous in the interests of his employer on the rue Saint-Dominique in Paris.

In the spring of 1764, Provenchère gave the marquis a detailed description of his wife's property. The Cul-de-Sac valley extended about 50 km east of Port-au-Prince reaching almost to the Spanish frontier. The site of indigo plantations at the beginning of the century, cane began to appear in the 1720s. By the 1760s sugar plantations greatly increased, encouraged by the efficient communal use of the water of *Grande Rivière*. By 1789 over half of the valley of 40,000 hectares was irrigated and there were 188 *sucreries*, about one-eighth of the total number on the island. The La Rochefoucauld-Conflan concession ranked in size somewhat below the largest habitations belonging to the Segur, Santo, Fleuriau, Vaudreuil, or Bougars, but equal in number of slaves. The two adjoining plantations totalled about 220 *carreaux* (250 hectares), of which about 80 *carreaux* or one-third was in cane and *vivres*, the rest in savannes and grazing land or still uncleared. Provenchère, like all *habitants* of the island, counted the cane fields in *pièces*, 12 *pièces* at "Vareux" and 10 at "les Sources". The slave force was impressive—422 in 1763, increasing to 449 in 1768, placing the marquis and the marshal among the largest slaveholders in Saint-Domingue. As they said on the island, "Il a 400!".

Provenchère proceeded to estimate sugar production at 350,000 lbs (350 *milliers*) of raw sugar (*bruts*) at Varreux and 125 *milliers* of refined sugar (*blancs*) at des Sources. At 1764 prices this production would yield an annual *net* revenue (that is, after expenses on the island and costs of transport and sale are deducted) of about 100,000 livres colonial money or 67,000 livres *argent de France*. But Provenchère promised even better returns as the irrigation project got underway. He advised the marquis to leave the land on the hillsides (*les mornes*) for livestock and sheep (attempting no coffee or indigo) and concentrate "toutes les forces sur les deux sucreries".

The marquis replied in great detail, displaying a certain grasp of the island's sugar economy, much of it learned from his wife and sister-in-law. He said that he had spoken to habitants of Cul-de-Sac, then at Paris, about using *charrues* to better till the soil and also to reduce labor costs. His brother-in-law, the marshal, strongly endorsed the irrigation project for the plain and asked for a map of both plantations. Then, after praising Provenchère for his *gestion* and soliciting his continued services, the marquis became meticulous—to excess. It would not be for the last time.

We found the running expenses excessive, and the accounts too brief and insufficiently detailed for many of the items.

He especially wanted an annual "prospectus" of the slaves—the number of births, deaths, purchases, causes of death, sex distribution, age when put to work in the fields. There was no need, however, to list the names of the slaves, he wrote, simply indicate "acheté tant de têtes de nègres". What possible interest to the marquis whether they were called Télémaque or Lizbeth!

1764, the first year after the Seven Years' War, proved a good one for sugar planters. Prices were high for both raw and refined sugar, and the accumulated war stocks—500 Milliers—sold well. The marquis was delighted—"de fort honnêtes revenus", he wrote, and the mortgages paid off besides. The marquis was prompted to divulge his future plans to his zealous procureur-gérant.

My present ambition is to amass enough capital to buy a property in France of sufficient revenue to permit me to live on it during war-time... I am hoping to spend about 100,000 *ecus* (3000,000 *livres*) on it... Five more years of revenue like this one of 1764, and I can buy that land here in France.

The marquis was anxious to amass this capital "before la prochaine guerre". He added that "Even though I owe my advancement as a military man to war, I shall always be glad to sacrifice my personal interest to the public good because I was a citizen before I was a military man". La Rochefoucauld possessed a certain flamboyance. Presumably he meant that peace was essential to a successful island economy. Another consideration encouraging rapid action, he said, was the advanced age of M. le Marechal, his brother-in-law, whose death would necessitate a partage of their joint holdings on Saint-Domingue. The marquis sounded more like a nineteenth-century business tycoon than a French aristocrat when he exhorted his gérant: "Time is dear and precious. Do not overlook anything that will increase our revenues. Send a map of the plantations; I doubt that I shall ever see them, unless by some chance I am made governor of Saint-Domingue, which is not very likely."

The tone and substance of the marquis's letter, written at the beginning of a generation of correspondence with Nicholas Provenchère, well reflects the mentality of the absentee owner, the desire for large and speedy returns and an indifference to the colony as anything more than an exotic gold mine. There is perhaps the added apprehension that this source of wealth is fragile and ephemeral, to be secured only by re-investment of the proceeds in the métropole. The imperative of speed also imparted a certain ambivalence to the marquis's instructions, and a hesitancy about taking risks for the future, that hampered Provenchère's task on the island.

“Make as much sugar as you can, sans cependant fatiguer la terre au point de l’user”. How could Provenchère determine when that point was reached? Eventually all cane land is “used”. In the years that followed the marquis vacillated between supporting investments that promised higher sugar production in the future and a meticulous, even carping, review of every “frais d’exploitation” recorded in Provenchère accounts sent *en double* the first of each calendar year from Port-au-Prince to Paris where they were verified and returned, arriving back in Provenchère’s hands about 12 to 14 months later. The gérant was expected to write at least twice a month and reply to all of the marquis’s queries; it took at least two months for a letter to cross the Atlantic. One gains a certain respect for the postal system which permitted such paper-controls to function. But Provenchère might well have gotten on better without so many instructions and questions.

On the one hand, the marquis supported the irrigation project for the Cul-de-Sac plain, an intricate system of dikes, canals, and aqueducts that distributed the water equitable among some hundred sugar plantations. It was the pride of the island’s technology and rightly so. The marquis did understand the necessity of water for growing cane. In the 1760s he proposed using plows instead of hoes (entirely beyond the competence of the slaves, observed Provenchère), and ended by using them in the 1770s on the highlands for clearing the land for coffee planting (also contrary to the gérant’s advice, given soil conditions). He acquiesced, albeit somewhat reluctantly, to Provenchère’s proposal to install a new *purgerie* in 1775 and four new *chaudières de cuivre* in 1786, both expensive investments, requiring materials from France. This last purchase was part of a plan to develop a new method of sugar refining that Provenchère had observed on neighboring plantations and been tested by Belin de Villeneuve and Barre de Saint-Venant, both experts on sugar-refining on the island. By the 1780s Provenchère was convinced that the only way to increase revenues was to perfect the quality of the Marquis’s sugar, by new refining techniques and also by replanting new cane each year. The marquis went along with this.

On the other hand, the marquis worried about every expense large and small. Why did Provenchère import flour and rice for the slaves when they could grow *vivres*—patates, pois, mil, bananes, manioc—in their own gardens or on the highlands? Why were mill repairs so expensive? Why did Provenchère need so many barrels and lime, lumber and nails, pots and forms—all imported at considerable expense, most of it from France. It was especially discouraging for the marquis to learn from Provenchère that the 2000 *pots et formes* sent

all the way from Orleans via Nantes, were found to be defective, half broken upon arrival at Cul-de-Sac. Why were local white artisans and workers so expensive? Was it necessary to pay for food and give gratifications besides? Then there were the salaries for the plantation staff—overseers, accountants, sugar-refining experts not to forget Provenchère's salary of 12,000 per annum.

However, the most important source of friction between the marquis and his attorney concerned the slaves. Why were so many replacements needed? Why were they dying at such a prodigious rate? Was Provenchère neglecting their health, feeding them inadequately

TABLE III

Slave Work Force on the Plantations of La Rochefoucauld-Bayers

<i>Date</i>	<i>Births</i>	<i>Deaths</i>	<i>Net</i>	<i>Purchases</i>	<i>Total Slaves</i>
1763	—	—			422
1764	—	—			—
1765	11	4	+7		438 (92 sick)
1766	—	—			—
1767	—	—			—
1768	10	14	-4	7	449 (100 sick)
1769	6	18	-12		—
1770	7	22	-15	6	(Earthquake)
1771	3	16	-13		—
1772	10	11	-1		410
1773	7	10	-3		407
1774	6	7	-1		405
1775	3	10	-7	9	406
1776	—	—			—
1777	—	—			396
1778	6	23	10	10	388
1779	9	16			—
1780	—	—			—
1781	—	—			359
1782	—	—			—
1783	15	30	-15	50 (-8)*	386 * (sold)
1784	5	4	+1		—
1785	10	15	-5	13	394
1786	7	9	-2		392
1787	—	—			—
1788	22	29	-7	22	— (115 inoculated)
1789	—	—		22	385

Note: — Blank Spaces = Unknown

and treating them improperly? The marquis had before him each year the list of births, deaths, and purchases, though the rubric "cause of death" was soon dropped. He was chagrined to see that the total number fell from 449 in 1768 to 359 in 1781, to rise again to 385 by 1789, but only by purchasing 107 new slaves between 1783 and 1789. Slaves were expensive. In the 1780s they cost between 2,000 and 2,500 livres for a *nègre* between 18 and 30 years, somewhat less for a *negresse* in the same age bracket. Every new slave needed at least a year to be "acclimatized" to the island, and could not be put to heavy work immediately. Moreover, the highest death rate seemed to be among these newcomers. Reviewing Provenchère's neat account from the calm security of a townhouse study in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, the marquis and his brother-in-law could easily detect the increase in plantation expenses from the 1770s to the 1780s. In the five years before the American war they averaged 80,000 livres; in the seven years after 1780 they averaged 131,000, an increase of 64.0%. One-quarter (25.5%) of the total expenses on the island in the 1780s represented the cost of new slaves. La Rochefoucauld needed no special expertise, beyond combining his plantation expenses with his shipping accounts and sugar sales, sent by his commission agents at Nantes and Bordeaux, in order to ascertain the trend of his annual profits from the sugar over a twenty year period. They were decidedly less in the 1780s than in the early 1770s both in absolute figures and as a percentage of total sales. To be sure, 64,000 livres net (average for the 1780s) was still a substantial revenue even in colonial money, but it was not the 87,000 net of the interwar years (1766-1778). In 1785 La Rochefoucauld had not yet bought that domain in France he had been confident of having back in 1764.

Of course the reasons for the decline in annual net revenue were not so readily detected at the time. But the modern economic historian can read the signs well enough. The accounts and the correspondence suggest strongly that productivity (especially on les Sources) was in slow decline, from about 490 *milliers* in the 1760s, to 433 m. in the 1770s, to only 350 m. in the 1780s. True, the rise in sugar prices (per *quintal*) in Europe in these same years largely compensated for this fall in production, aided no doubt by Provenchère's effort to shift to high-grade refined sugar. But expense on the island absorbed more and more of the sugar (sold locally to meet immediate costs) so that the "envois" to France were less than they had been before the American War.

Not unexpectedly given the marquis's bookkeeping mentality, the commission agents at Nantes and Bordeaux were also bombarded with questions about the expenses. Why did freight charges vary so

TABLE I
Two Plantations on Saint-Domingue (Cul de Sac)
La Rochefoucauld-Bayers

Date	Sales of Sugar {000}	Expenses on Island {000}	Expenses of Transportation, Taxes, Insurance, etc. {000}	Profits in Thousands of Livres	Profits as % of Sales
1766	163.0#	61.0#	23.5#	78.5#	46.7
1767	176.4	65.0	23.9	87.5	49.6
1773	170.6	72.5	22.8	75.3	44.1
1774	182.0	62.7	25.8	93.6	51.4
1775	215.9	94.2	26.3	95.4	44.2
1778	198.6	86.2	22.2	90.2	45.4
1779	82.5	82.5	—	—	—
1780	70.5	68.6	—	—	—
1781	50.8	45.2	—	—	—
1782	170.0	110.0	—	—	—
1783	223.8	146.5	39.8	37.5	16.8
1784	179.2	96.0	21.7	61.5	34.3
1785	223.7	112.4	24.6	86.7	38.8
1786	204.4	131.4	16.3	56.7	27.8
1787	253.2	149.0	17.3	66.9	26.4
1788	231.9	135.0	25.9	71.0	30.6
1789	205.8	146.0	13.9	45.9	22.3

much? What were all these "droits"? Was it necessary to insure the cargo in "la belle saison" and need it be insured at full value? (The marquis had reason to regret his practice of under-insuring his sugar cargoes in 1778 when he lost 100 milliers to English men-of-war.) The marquis had a long correspondence with the merchant houses at Bordeaux and Nantes over the practice of granting a two percent discount for prompt payment (three months) by *lettre de change*. The marquis simply could not grasp why this discount was necessary and frequently delayed sales in a vain effort to avoid it. At one point, he was so upset (or confused) by the various expenses on the shipping accounts that he accused his correspondent at Bordeaux of taking a 10% commission instead of the usual 2%. Ironically, despite all of the marquis's complaining, the shipping accounts show clearly that the absolute charges for transport and sale scarcely changed over 25 years (ca. 20,000 livres per annum) and actually accounted for a

TABLE II

Accounts (2): Sales, Expeditions, Expenses (by weight-lbs.)

Date	Sales (in 000 lbs.)	Expeditions to France (in Thousands of lbs.)	Expenses Paid in Sugar on Island (% of Sales)	Expenses in Livres (000#) Slaves	(cash) Other costs
1766	448	254	41.1	—#	39.0#
1767	530	330	37.7	13.0	23.6
1773	415	358	13.7	11.8	19.0
1774	417	384	7.9	4.7	29.3
1775	481	362	24.7	11.8	61.5
1778	418	213	49.0	22.5	44.0
1779	235	—	100.0	14.2	43.7
1780	209	—	100.0	—	42.3
1781	105	—	100.0	—	36.4
1782	369	130	64.8	14.2	38.3
1783	548	282	48.5	79.6	35.0
1784	400	291	27.3	33.8	28.5
1785	381	258	32.3	41.6	27.0
1786	269	140	48.0	18.4	45.5
1787	328	202	38.4	22.0	25.0
1788	350	194	44.6	12.0	30.8
1789	408	193	52.7	26.0	25.8

smaller and smaller percentage of the total costs (i.e., including plantation expenses).

The truth of the matter was that the marquis's revenues from the island were suffering the double effect of declining productivity and increasing costs of exploitation, the most important element of which was the cost of new slaves. Provenchère had warned the marquis from the very beginning of his "service" that one of the two habitations (les Sources) had been in operation since 1751 and needed special care. By 1785 he said it could only be brought back to full production by replanting each *pièce* in new cane every year and this would inevitably require abundant water and slave labor. Moreover, as he developed more advanced refining techniques, Provenchère claimed he needed more male slaves for the heavier work at the *purgerie* and *chaudières*. At one point he pictured "forty women, and not a single male, in the cane fields at Vareux". At the very least, he pleaded, we must bring back the number of slaves to 400. "Only with *des bras* can we make good revenue".

Provenchère admitted that chronic illness and epidemics were common among the slave gangs and that he was doing everything possible to limit their effects. He built a new hospital, hired a new surgeon, and inoculated most of the slave force (115 slaves) against smallpox in 1786, apparently without success. He also attempted to put more land into *vivres*, at least that in the highlands, marginal land to be sure. Nevertheless, these measures did not stop the hemorrhage of mortalities. For a brief period in the 1760s, Provenchère hoped that births would outnumber deaths, then he argued that M. Fougeu's slave force was already getting old when the marquis inherited the plantations, and finally he admitted that he did not know why they were dying. Between 1768 and 1775 108 slaves died for a net loss of 56. They were only partially replaced, and during the war (1778-83), as the losses continued, none could be obtained. (The efficiency of the British Navy is striking here). Provenchère was desperate by 1783 when the total slave-labor force numbered only 359. Without full authorization from Paris, he proceeded to buy slaves in large numbers—63 in the first three years after the war. But despite all his efforts, he was unable to build the labor force back to 400, much less to the all-time high of 449 attained in 1768.

La Rochefoucauld tried to slow down these purchases, even though his contacts and friends on the island (Bretton des Chapelles, *senechal* of Saint-Marc, for example) who knew the marquis's properties, urged him to increase his *mobilier*. It was at root a battle between the absentee *rentier* and the on-the-spot entrepreneur, between the policy of reducing expenses (especially labor costs) and risking new investment in the hope of increased production and greater rewards later. Despite the enormous amount of paper that crossed the Atlantic to the Hotel Conflans, the marquis had an imperfect grasp of the economic and social dimensions of a slave plantation, something Nicolas Provenchère understood from 30 years in Saint-Domingue.

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Imagine what conditions were like on a plantation of 400 slaves managed by seven white men and one mulatto, situated at least 21 km from Port-au-Prince, somewhat less from Croix de Bouquets, a *bourg* of 600 persons. Here one begins to realize what it meant for the whites to be outnumbered, not 18 to one (the ratio for the island as a whole in 1789), but 57 to one. The question of discipline and control was real as Nicolas Provenchère and his fellow *gérant*, Charles-Louis Robion, had learned only too well. (Robion replaced Provenchère as *procureur-gérant* when the latter was in France from 1777 to 1782).

Provenchère referred to a slave revolt only twice, once after the earthquake of 1770 when a Dominican monk preached about the Day of Judgment to slaves at Port-au-Prince (or what was left of it) and again twenty years later in 1790 when a philanthropic society in France preached an equally dangerous doctrine of civil rights for the *gens de couleur*. Provenchère's and Robion's daily contact with slaves was of a different order, revealing complex and contradictory attitudes ranging from paternalism and a solicitude for the physical well-being of the slave to incomprehension, fear, and contempt. Individual slaves were sometimes treated with kindness, even affection, while the *atelier* as a whole was considered difficult, lazy, unreliable, amoral, childlike and on occasion dangerous, even violent. How frequent the contradictory phrases appear: *bon sujet* and *scélérat*, *malheureux* and *coquin*!

Provenchère told one story of misplaced generosity to the marquis. A *nègre sucrerier* with an inflamed leg was given written permission to leave the habitation "pour aller trouver sa guérison dans les bassins d'eaux chaude que nous avons dans le quartier".

This slave decided not to come back to the plantation and for six months used his permit to enjoy complete liberty. Since such conduct on the part of a slave is highly irregular and incompatible with the principles of good administration, the manager had given orders to the (black) drivers to seize him if they could find him. One of the drivers entered a hut where he was in order to seize him, but this wretch resisted and plunged a knife into the driver's body. This driver, a young black and a reliable individual (*bon sujet*) died of his wounds... I must make an example to the workforce... I shall keep this black in irons for the rest of his days; but since he must work with the rest of the workforce in the daytime, he will be kept in the stock every night.

That execution ("*faire périr*" was the current euphemism) and mutilation of slaves tended to be replaced by other forms of physical punishment such as the bar, the spiked collar, and the "*cachot*" at the end of the century; it was one response to the labor shortage everywhere on the island. The policy of not wasting labor power is reflected in another incident reported by Robion just after he replaced Provenchère in 1777. Robion suspected his cook, Télémaque, of trying to poison him. Fear of poisoning was common among planters and *gérants*—indeed among all whites—especially since the famous Macandal affair in 1758. (Macandal was a kind of black Cartouche, suspected of occult knowledge of tropical medicines, of conspiracy, and of alleged immortality, charges widely believed among whites and blacks alike. Macandal was captured and "burned alive" in 1758.)

M. Lereboure (?), the manager of the Fleuriau plantation, who... is your neighbor, was almost poisoned by three domestic slaves. He owes his life to a young black boy who, fortunately, warned him that he was to be done away with. The broth was given to a dog, who died almost instantly. The three slaves are in prison and are to be burned (alive). They have testified that they poisoned M. Rasteau, the former *procureur*, who died last year.

Robion was convinced that his case was similar, but he hesitated to "faire périr" Télémaque.

The other slaves state unanimously that it was he (Télémaque) who poisoned Joachim (a good domestic, the former valet of M. Fougeu and the household manager), but since we have no physical proof (Joachim had been opened up by the surgeon, Dr. Launay, who reported no sign of poisoning), he must not be executed right away. Meanwhile, he will plant canes.

The marquis commented on the case. He advised that if Robion's suspicions proved to be founded, Télémaque should be "kept in irons, so that he will have no communication with any of the slaves of the work-gang." He did not advise execution for attempted murder, presumably because his labor was needed in the cane.

To the problem of control and the fear that individual acts of defiance might become 'contagious' (another key word), was the added mystery of suicides.

One month ago a slave named Daniel, a creole who worked as a waggoner, was found hanged in the woods of M. le Marquis de Branca... he had not undergone any punishment. He was even in the hospital because he was sick. In the last year at least ten or twelve slaves on the plantations of Du Vivier and Labrousse, your neighbors, have destroyed themselves... These deaths diminish the work-force. I feel sorry for these wretches.

Economic considerations aside, Robion occasionally grasped the nature of despair. On one rare occasion he recognized that a black man was capable of love that went beyond volupté.

I attribute the despair of this slave to the love of a negress who was his wife, and with whom he had ten or twelve children. Despite his age of sixty, he was a useful and reliable subject, and I am very sorry to lose him. I do not recall having whipped him a single time...

Again economic utility is mixed with a certain notion of retributive justice. Why would a slave commit suicide if he were well treated? Perplexing.

Apparently in response to La Rochefoucauld's concern about high mortality among the slaves, Robion wrote a long letter about his care of the slave labor force. Again he seems preoccupied with rewards and punishments, almost like raising children.

I am not given to cruelty, and I try to soften the lot of these people, which is truly worthy of pity. Nor do I like to punish a slave unless I have thoroughly examined whether he is really in the wrong... I should reproach myself all my life for having inflicted punishment on a slave who did not deserve it. Your slaves are never driven while they are working, and I do not even like to make them stay up at night. When a slave has worked hard all day, he must have his rest at night, except at the time when they all must work a night shift, for example during the grinding of the cane. This operation cannot be put off.

Yet one must discriminate. Although Robion would "jamais sorti un nègre qui ne soit bien remis de l'hôpital de l'habitation," he said there were "sujets qui sont naturellement paresseux qui voudraient, s'il était possible, rester toute l'année a l'hôpital parcequ'ils n'y font rien et qu'ils, y sont alimentés". Robion then turned to the many legitimately ill on the habitation. Some 20 to 25 slaves must work in the irrigation water which seemed to cause fever and lung problems. He ordered 40 boxes of "pilules antivénériennes" all the way from Paris. "J'ai donc traité 4 nègres; ils sont aujourd'hui bien portants et sont au jardin". One can only hope they did not subsequently contract mercury poisoning.

In the following spring of 1778 Robion described "des pluies abondantes, bon pour les cannes, mais mauvais pour la santé des nègres".

We have had a kind of epidemic among the blacks. In the last three weeks I have lost four or five slaves, two of them old... I have had three of them opened in my presence. Their lungs were diseased, and they also had an abscess... I am not sure what our Aesculapiuses call this disease. All I know is that it spreads very easily, especially to the slaves who all drink from the same vessel when they are working in the fields... At Vareux I have many cases of general exhaustion (maladies de langueur).

This may well have been a case of lead-poisoning —the vases were often made of lead. Lead-poisoning was probably much more lethal and wide-spread than the poisons presumably served by cooks like Télémaque.

Both Provenchère and Robion complained regularly to the marquis about the lack of food for the slaves. In early 1766 Provenchère

increased the number of *pièces de vivres*, defending his decision to the marquis.

The slaves, Monsieur, need food. This is an essential point, and yet it is neglected by many planters. How can we demand hard and painful work from these people if they are not fed? I myself much prefer to see them well fed and content. This makes for better work, because they are more willing to do it.

Robion made the same appeal eleven years later, urging expansions of land planted in manioc, potatoes, and bananas, "surtout pour les nouveaux nègres qui demandent l'être acclimatés a l'île." The Congos in particular were "très degoutés pour la nourriture," one reason why Robion preferred slaves from the Côte d'Or when he could get them. Here again was a curious touch abstract justice added to the usual utilitarian argument.

These people are, it is true, much less easily fatigued than we are, but they are human. One must treat them humanely and let a great many little things go by. This is the way to make them obey and to get good service from them.

It is impossible to disentangle this mix of economic utility and a more lofty "humanity".

In the 1780s the food shortage had still not been remedied. Provenchère defended his purchase of rice for the slaves.

Despite all of my efforts to plant foodstuffs and to have a certain amount of land set aside for this purpose, I never have enough for your slaves, especially on the Les Source plantation. The quality of the soil is completely inappropriate for this production. I must therefore supplement the food supply by the purchase of other foodstuffs.

Provenchère, good manager and aware of the marquis's concern about wasteful expenditure, felt obliged to add:

We give (the rice) especially to sick slaves and to nursing women.

A dietary analysis of slave food could be undertaken, but I doubt it would add much to the agent's qualitative assessment that there was not enough food for the slaves even in peacetime.

Regarding the clothing and housing of the slaves, the case of the La Rochefoucauld plantations seems little different from the general situation described by Gabriel Debien in his now classic work on slavery on St-Domingue. To food, Robion added clothing as the most

urgent need of the "*misérables*". Provenchère said that the amount of cloth sent from Nantes should be increased so that the slaves could have a change of clothes at least once a year (sic). Provenchère also reminded the marquis about the role of clothes in reinforcing hierarchy, a notion the marquis should have found familiar. "Pour les commandeurs, ouvriers, et autres principaux nègres... on les distingue par une toile plus fine". Drivers were usually fitted out with a riding coat and wide-brimmed hat in addition to the long whip with the short handle. Apparently the artisans servicing the sugar mill and purgeries also wore better cloth. (The relations between drivers and cane workers deserves investigation—potential leaders or first victims of a slave revolt?)

The earthquake of June, 1770 brought down every building on the twin plantations and completely disrupted the intricate irrigation system so vital to the industry. Provenchère reported in July that "les nègres sont logés sous de petites baraques ou sous des tentes." By the fall, however, he said that other *gérants* had been alarmist and that he was fast putting everything back together. After all, not a single slave had been lost and the cane harvest would be delayed by only a month, though production would be less than normal. Provenchère announced that first priority went to repair the mill and the purgeries. Even his own *case* (house) could wait and of course those of the slaves as well. At least they were not sleeping in water as on other *habitations* in the plain. Not unexpectedly, black mortality rose again in November.

Fourteen deaths since June (1770)... chest complaints, no cure. But this time Provenchère's explanation of these deaths touched a deeper cord.

These illnesses, which are prevalent throughout the plain, can be attributed to the malaise which the blacks, and even the whites... have felt since the earthquake, given the fright caused by the event itself and the unhealthy state of their dwellings, for they had to sleep outdoors.

Eventually the *cases* were rebuilt. Although they were little more than two-room huts with straw roofs, at least they were not excessively crowded.

Provenchère had often minimized the death rate among the slaves by stressing the number of aged or "hors de service" among them. He and Robion were both proud of their policy of selling many of these "old and feeble" and using the money to buy young slaves fit for heavy labor in the cane fields. Provenchère explained the technique in 1765 to the marquis:

I have sold a negress, who is old and crippled, to a free black for 1350 livres.. for the said Magdelaine... 70 years old (her value in the inventory is 150 livres) is no longer useful to the plantation. The (free) black has paid me 1200 livres in cash and has given me a promissory note for the rest. With this money I hope to buy another negress to replace this one. It would be very advantageous if one could get rid of all the old slaves on the plantations at such a price.

The annual account records regular sales of this sort. The buyers were often children or relatives, themselves freed who wished to free their parents in the old age. *Nègres libres* and *mulâtres libres* were able to save money from their crafts as artisans or cattlemen in the highlands. Less frequent were payments by the slaves themselves.

An old slave, 75-years old, by the name of Coridan, wants to spend his days in freedom and also obtain that of his wife, aged 70, named Launice. He seems to have gold and has offered me to buy their freedom. I am asking 1800 livres... With this money I can buy a good strong slave.

In 1782 the black slave Philipeau, 70 years old was sold to the mulatto David "pour le rendre libre". In 1783 the negress Zabeth was sold to the mulatto Cassaneuve, quite possibly her child. The negress Catherine, "attaquée de la poitrine et ses enfants (5 et 3 ans)" were sold to Jean, "dit Jardin, un mulâtre libre" and possibly the father of Catherine's children. These transactions appear in the annual accounts under "extra revenues" and are listed after sales of cattle, usually to mulattoes for sums as high as 2500 livres. Significantly, mulattoes rarely appear on the slave lists except occasionally as children, for obvious reasons. There were no mulattoes on the marquis's slave list for 1768. They were likely to be *afranchis* (freedmen), and they preferred to live and labor elsewhere. The one mulatto on Provenchère's staff was the *gardien* of the *hatte* or cattle corral on the highlands north of the plain of Cul-de-Sac.

Sometimes these financial arrangements disguise more personal, indeed intimate, liaisons between whites and blacks on the plantations. In the same letter of July, 1777, Robion suggested that Provenchère had an unusual interest in a mulâtresse of 7 years and her black mother.

You also have a little seven-year-old mulatress, daughter of the negress Jacqueline who obtained her freedom some time before the departure of M. Provenchère (for France). This negress wants to buy her daughter (who was born before she herself was freed). Provenchère has said that he will give you a little black boy for 1200 to 1300 livres to replace this mulatress.

There were so few white men on the plantation, it would seem relatively easy to establish paternity. The case of Barbaroux, gérant at Vareux, seems perfectly clear. Barbaroux indicated an equal concern for one of his household servants, the 16 year old mulatresse, Sainte, who subsequently gave birth to a quatroun boy. Barbaroux first offered Sainte a black husband from the next slave ship and ended by buying Sainte and her baby himself for 3600 livres, a very high price even in wartime. Robion assured the marquis that, if he could find two nègres for this price, he would buy them, but he might have to wait for peace time to replace Sainte.

Given the almost total absence of white women on the plantation (Robion's wife is the only white woman ever mentioned in the plantation correspondence), it is a wonder there were not more sexual liaisons between the white gérants and the slave women. Just as nègres libres and gens de couleur often purchased their fathers or mothers, so white men purchased their mulatto offspring and sometimes their black mistresses, usually including their "Liberté". While white paternity was almost never explicit, it was clearly one motive for *affranchissement*. Sometimes white paternity came from outside the plantation. A young mulatresse named Gotiche at Vareux was believed to have been fathered by a habitant at Boucassin, a neighboring habitation, "et a ce titre à désiré lui procurer la Liberté." As usual Provenchère drove a hard bargain, receiving 2400 livres to buy "un beau et fort nègre... plus utile qu'elle dans vôtre jardin."

Sometimes the gérants bought slaves from the marquis not because they were their own children, but because they were sentimentally attached to them as house servants. Robion expressed this motive when he wrote:

Would you be so kind as to let me have the slave called Jean-Pierre, son of the negress Marthe? I am attached to this individual, who has been my personal servant for several years. I shall replace him with a good, strong slave.

Jean-Pierre is a real person for Robion; by contrast the "bon et beau nègre" might be a prime mule to operate the sugar mill. Mules were usually listed after the slaves on the plantation inventories, often by name and age just like the *nègres et nègresses*.

In 1774 Provenchère asked the marquis to sell him "un nègre domestique âgé de 20 a 25 ans nommé Nicolas, fils de la nommée Agathe, servante de laditte habitation, et une nègresse servante... âgée de 40 ans, nommée Marie, avec l'enfant dont elle est enceinte..." The marquis consented, but he too had learned how to turn such attachments to economic advantage. He asked that Nicolas and Marie

be replaced by "deux bons nègres males." Unfortunately Marie died in childbirth, and a few months later Provenchère asked the marquis to annul her sale "because of her death." Nicolas he received as his own: he was probably the same *nègre valet* Provenchère had taken to Bordeaux with him in 1769. Provenchère may have named "Nicolas" when he first appeared on the plantation or later after he had served as a domestique in the *grande case* (main house) with his mother. He replaced Nicolas in the slave force with Jean-Baptiste, a cooper.

Not only house servants were rewarded for services over the years. Aged drivers sometimes were granted their *Liberté*. Perhaps November, 1790 was a time to reward the loyal. That was the month when Provenchère wrote with concern about the subversive activities of one Vincent Ogé, a mulatto upstart in the north of the island. He worried about the "manias" from Paris contaminating Saint-Domingue. The white *maître-raffineur* had just received a gold watch as a gift from the marquis for his many years of loyal service. Provenchère also received authorization from the marquis to free one of the black *commandeurs*.

I have also received the privately signed act of manumission of Agnan (60 years old), driver at the Les Sources plantation... I have informed him of your intentions with all possible solemnity. He threw himself at my feet, embracing my knees, and swearing that he would remain faithful to you and attached to your interests. He is the father of seven children. I plan to leave his wife in the quarters. He will stay on at our plantation. Where could he go to be better off?

Can one imagine a more quintessentially paternalistic event? Deference, sycophantic appreciation, and the assurance that he would stay on. Provenchère added that he would even continue to "surveiller les malintentionés", presumably as a kind of informer. Finally, the *procureur* noted that the act of liberty was neither notarized nor authorized by the intendant, thus avoiding the extra legal expense and the tax on manumissions which could reach 2000 livres.

Surveiller les malintentionés—watch out for troublemakers. The phrase recalls again the problem of control. Manumission was a delicate policy, providing reward for the good behavior and loyal service of a selected few without opening the flood-gates to freedom and a massive increase in the number of freedmen—both black and mulatto. It was an issue much discussed by literate whites from Barre de Saint Venant to Hillard d'Auberteuille. Provenchère and Robion, backed by the marquis in Paris, managed in a more piecemeal way. All three of them preferred to liberate a certain number of the aged and *hors de service* with the intent of using the purchasing money to

buy young slaves. They played upon the sentimental attachments of the buyers by charging high prices. Occasionally their hard-headed policy turned against them when, for example, they wanted to buy slaves themselves who were either their own offspring or favorite houseservants. There remained a small number of those like Agnan who were rewarded for long service (without charge) but with a good chance that they would stay on the plantation and continue to serve as cattle-watchers, guards of the stores, or informers on troublemakers in the slave gangs. Theirs was indeed a narrowly conceived paternalism.

For in the final analysis the bulk of the slaves were regarded with distrust, not so much fear of open rebellion as a pre-occupation with latent hostility or passive resistance. The concern about theft was one reflection of this distrust. When Baronier, the sugar-refining expert, died in 1767, Provenchère hired one of those young bachelors now arriving in droves from the métropole to learn the techniques of sugar production and also "empêcher les vols." After the earthquake in 1770, he wanted the storehouses repaired as soon as possible; otherwise "the sugar is exposed to theft by the nègres." The same was true of the plantation tools, especially the machettes; they must be stored under lock and key. Given the willingness of young whites to work on a plantation for a pittance (in hope of becoming a gérant one day), Robion wondered about adding a few white to the staff.

It is best to have several whites who supervise everything. I have taken on a young man as *sous-économé* (the lowest rank of overseer). He only has his board... It is necessary to have two persons at a sugar mill. When the Master Refiner is out in the fields, someone must be there to supervise the refinery; and also when I am doing the grinding, I want to have a white man at the sugar mill day and night. In this manner the slaves cannot make any mischief (*cognerie*) and the work is done better.

The "cognerie" that seemed so ubiquitous was usually theft of sugar. Like the prevalent habit of marauding at night to steal *vivres* from neighboring plantations, such minor pilfering again points to the inadequacy of the food supply. The slaves were chronically hungry. Although the gérants repeatedly admitted that the slave diet was deficient, they added a moral dimension to the crime. The Africans simply had no sense of right or wrong, especially no respect for private property.

Like other absentee owners with some contact with the clergy in France, La Rochefoucauld at some point asked his agents about religious instruction for slaves. After all, two of the marquis's brothers

were bishops, and some religious instruction was prescribed by the *Code Noir*. Robion, who had on occasion professed his preference for just and even gentle treatment of the slaves—"après tout, ils sont des hommes"—replied curtly to the marquis's inquiry.

It is really a waste of time, M. le Marquis, to try to instruct the blacks in the said Holy Religion. If you thoroughly knew these people, you would realize that they are capable of everything and not likely to do good.

For Robion the propensity of African slaves for *délits* was cultural, if not racial, and beyond the remedy of the Christian religion. In fact, religion could be a threat to social stability on the island. Had not Provenchère witnessed the danger of prayers and preaching by certain Dominicans after the earthquake of 1770? Bretton des Chapelles, resident planter and friend of the marquis, expressed it this way:

...a monk who preached in the prayer services he held for the blacks at Port-au-Prince a doctrine that envisaged nothing less than the annihilation of the city's whites. The evil would not have failed to spread.

This "moine", at first labelled a "jesuit," had announced the approach of the Last Judgment amidst the ruins of Port-au-Prince before the last tremors had ceased. The "credulous," white or black, might have reason to believe it. Was there a Divine standard of right and wrong? Would whites also be judged by it? The "scélérat de prêtre" was arrested and sent to France for trial. There was no slave revolt in 1770.

The marquis's *gérants* never mention a chapel or even a baptism on the plantation. There was one reference to a local tax to pay for a church at Port-au-Prince, one more expense for the marquis, wrote Provenchère with irritation. The *gérants* of Saint-Domingue were not known for encouraging the Catholic clergy to visit the plantations or to "assemble" the slaves for any reason whatsoever. Theirs was not a world conducive to meditation on moral philosophy or the universal brotherhood of sinners.

Yet if slaves were incapable of benefitting from religion, they were not entirely deprived of learning ability, especially household duties and crafts. Recall that on sugar plantations one-third or more of the slaves were too young, too old, or too sick to work. On La Rochefoucauld's two *habitations* in 1768, 240 of the 428 slaves (56.7%) could be considered "*actifs*". 180 in the cane fields and 60 in crafts or household. Sugarmaking is, after all, an industry requiring semi-skilled labor. In 1768 in addition to the three white master-*raffineurs*, there

TABLE IV
Slave Work Force in 1768

	Nègres	Nègresses	Total	% de Total
Des Sources (249 slaves)				
Fieldhands	48	56	104	42.0%
Crafts	30		30	
Houseservants	4	5	9	
Infirmary		2	2	
<i>Actifs:</i>			145	58.2%
Feeble	20	20	40	16.1%
Children	30	34	64	25.7%
<i>Non-Actifs:</i>			104	41.8%
Total:	132	117	249	100.0%
Vareux (179 Slaves)				
Fieldhands	41	35	76	45.5%
Crafts	11		11	
<i>Actifs:</i>			87	48.6%
New Slaves	4	4	8	
Feeble	19	25	44	24.7%
Children	22	18	40	22.4%
<i>Non-Actifs:</i>			92	51.4%
Total:	97	82	179	100.0%
Hatte:	(21 slaves: 18 nègres, 3 nègresses).			
			Males = 247	
			Females = 202	
			Grand Total: 449 Slaves	

were 17 black sugar-mill workers, 7 coopers, 4 carpenters, 4 machettimakers, 2 masons, and one blacksmith.

Robion and Provenchère were not always satisfied with white artisans and *workers*, though they employed them on a temporary basis for special projects, *corvées*, and building repairs. The marquis had urged them to employ white *laboueurs* who could use plows to clear land on the highlands. Robion reluctantly agreed not to use slaves for this work, "but I do not want to hire white workers at Saint-Domingue. These people now want to be paid big wages. Please send me one from Brittany who knows how to make his plows himself... I suggest three years as an indentured servant, and please draw

lost her speech... she indicated by signs that the pain was in her stomach, but the surgeon was unable to find out what kind of illness she had.

Apart perhaps from their "attachment" to Nicolas and Jean-Pierre, their young male domestics, Provenchère and Robion were not sentimental about their slaves.

* * *

Thirty years—1760 to 1790—is not long enough to chart a major shift in the management of a sugar plantation or in the treatment of slaves. We cannot identify specific "stress points" that would lead to a slave revolt in 1791. However, the Provenchère-Robion correspondence exposes the day-to-day relations between *gérant* and slave and demonstrates a profound ambivalence of attitude, treating the slave one moment as a commodity for production and another as a child, deserving minimal health care, capable of learning a skill and of being loyal to the master. Yet on balance the cold economic aspects predominate. The faithful slaves are not generously rewarded with "Liberté" in old age; they or their children pay a good price for it. An individual slave may make a loyal domestique or mistress; slaves as a whole are untrustworthy, prone to laziness, theft, and *marronage*, and more than occasionally to suicide, poisoning, and violence. They are amoral at best, impervious to religious instruction, and easily misled by outsiders from troublemaking priests to independent free blacks and mulattoes. They have to be watched. To be sure, Nicolas and Jean-Pierre were young domestics Provenchère and Robion knew and liked as human beings, but most slaves were either "beaux et forts nègres" for the cane fields or feeble and *hors de service*, a liability to the successful operation of the plantation. Perhaps this is not surprising in a slave economy. Yet I think there were special conditions that made the treatment of slaves on the La Rochefoucauld properties especially cold and calculating.

First, the nature of sugar-growing and manufacture in the Atlantic economy in the 18th century. The location of Saint-Domingue in a tropical climate that was not only uncomfortable but fever ridden, lacking good drinking water and incubator of bacterial diseases whose worst ravages were yet to come. Add to this earthquakes, hurricanes, and long spells of excessive dryness. Even more of a challenge was the distance between the island's sugar production and the European markets, extending as far as Sweden and Moscow to the

north and to Italy and Levant in the Mediterranean. But even the first leg of the voyage from Saint-Domingue to Nantes or Bordeaux for re-export required two months, assuming good weather. Adding the time to load and unload and await a favorable sale, from six months to a year might pass between the first report from Provençhère that he was harvesting the year's crop and the receipt of news of a sale from the merchants at Nantes or Bordeaux. Then the marquis had to wait another three to six months for payment usually in letters of exchange. Four months was the best time possible for sending instructions from Paris and receiving a reply from the island. To the problem of distance and communication must be added the vulnerability of the island during wartime. The marquis was realistic when he spoke about '*La prochaine guerre*'; war with the world's greatest naval power was a constant menace throughout the century. And the British Navy was brutally efficient; from 1779 to 1782, for example, not one pound of sugar reached France and not one barrel of French flour reached Saint-Domingue. Were it not for the 'Anglo-Americans' and the neutrals, especially the Dutch, the island would have been completely cut off from outside supplies, especially food.

The growing of cane and refining of sugar was quite different from traditional farming in France. It was a modern industry requiring heavy machinery, an advanced technology, an irrigation system, and a large disciplined labor force. This was its strength and weakness. Able to produce and refine large quantities of sugar to a growing market, it was dependent on replacement parts and fresh labor from across the Atlantic.

At the same time, there were large profits to be made selling sugar. Although many merchants in French ports complained about unpaid debts for their supplies sent to Saint-Domingue, plantation owners like the marquis had reason to be optimistic. Profit margins, that is, as percentage of sales, ranges between 30 and 45% despite all the marquis's complaints about expenses. It is true, of course, that the land was slowly being exhausted and that the expenses on the island were rising, but the absolute sums of revenue were still substantial, even in the 1780s, and far above a comparable 250-hectare domain in the métropole. Finally, the speculative aspects of the trade, still regarded with a certain suspicion by nobles and the *rentier* class in France, were largely hidden from public view by the distance and complexity of the operation and by the fact that most of the sugar did not stay in French ports for long.

The sugar industry and export trade was therefore delicate and uncertain, requiring continuous re-investment and meticulous management, and not even the most callous owner would deny that the

labor force was “peculiar”. But it was a tempting operation all the same. One understands the marquis’s early enthusiasm—indeed his avarice—and also his desire for speed as if the “Golden Calf” would not last forever. It was, of course, the emphasis on large and early returns that caused friction with the *gérants* who insisted on re-investing in slaves to hold up flagging production. But it also put Provenchère and Robion under constant pressure to produce those promised larger returns. And it also forced them to meet the marquis’s bookkeeping mentality by appearing petty on smaller expenses to give the impression of precision and economy, virtues of domagan administration in the *métropole*. Thus Provenchère marked every small saving from firing an accountant or cattle guard to selling old slaves to their children.

What is interesting about Provenchère and Robion is their double role as traditional economy-minded stewards on one hand, and as modern capitalist entrepreneurs on the other. Behind a facade of meticulous and often petty accounting, they were men open to new methods of production ranging from new planting techniques to new processes of sugar-refining, fully aware that the initial cost would be high. This is where the slaves entered the picture. The *gérants* needed them in large numbers, not only to replace the fallen, but also to support the new techniques. I suspect they believed that no amount of health care would lower the death rates appreciably, and the only way to make more sugar was to pour in more and more slaves from Africa. “Il ne faut que les bras sur vos biens” became a kind of battle-cry if not a cure-all. And the treatment of the slaves, though not wantonly cruel, reflects a policy of committing a maximum number of slaves to the cane fields and sugar mills and to keep them working hard. Activity that detracted from this prime task—theft, feigned or real illness, flight (temporary or permanent), violence in the gangs or *cases*, poisoning, suicide—must be relentlessly curbed. “Il faut que la machine marche” was a favorite expression of Nicolas Provenchère. It captures his priorities rather well.

Robion and Provenchère were also hybrids in another sense. They were professional estate managers who knew the rules of their *métier*, but they were also men with a respect for the social hierarchy and for the great families of France. Their deference and solicitude for the Marquis de La Rochefoucauld is not simply proper *politesse*; it is a reflection of a sense of working for someone important. Moreover, both men lived in a European world of clientage and reciprocal favors. Occasions arose when a recommendation from a La Rochefoucauld was useful—exemption from the militia, a public office in France, a place for a brother or son on the island, an intercession with

a minister or bishop in high places. When he was in France, Provenchère did not fail to send a gift of wine to the marquis in Paris or to express his joy at the birth and marriage of his children. When he was in prison at Bordeaux in 1769 for refusing to serve in the militia of Saint-Domingue, he continued to write regularly to the marquis about the plantation. He claimed that his locket containing the pictures of the Marquis and Marquise sustained him through this ordeal. Robion projected the image of a modest family man who was deeply chagrined at losing the marquis's favor in 1782. He wrote countless letters to the Marquis attempting to regain his favor. Only in 1789 did Provenchère seem to waver in his loyalty to a Great Name. Like other resident planters and gérants on the island, he had followed events in Paris with increasing alarm.

The *Société Philanthropique* (Amis des Noirs) has declared open war on us... I was pained to see on the list of members a person of your name.

How could a La Rochefoucauld ally himself with those who would give civil rights to the *gens de couleur* and perhaps even liberate the slaves!

A modern capitalist, a man in a hurry, a professional manager, a Marquis's attorney, even his "creature"—Provenchère was all of these. But one thing he was not—a converted Creol, a settler, an "American" in-the-making. In November, 1784, he wrote to his business correspondent, Jaure Jeune, merchant at Bordeaux:

When I returned to America, I was hoping, Monsieur, to spend no more than three or four years there and, having carried out the mission these ladies had entrusted to me, to return to the bosom of my family and to enjoy the little fortune I have amassed in my thirty years' stay on Saint-Domingue... Chance has given me the means to make a good bit of money by permitting me to rent a sugar mill whose lease I obtained rather cheaply. I am paying 16,000 livres French money for it, and in the course of the year 1785 it returned 100,000 livres. *L'appétit vient en mangeant* (The more one has the more one wants)... The owners are in France and will never come to Saint-Domingue. I can see that it may be possible to buy it... It is worth about 500,000 livres... I have made an offer of 200,000 francs. I am short 20 or 30,000 livres tournois.

Provenchère formed a partnership with his old colleague, Barba-roux, gérant at Vareux, and together they supplied the property with 67 slaves, to begin production in six months. "Tout le monde estime

que j'ai fait la meilleure affaire possible... Je peux me retirer en France et attendre patiemment mes revenus." A gleeful moment of speculation, but fortune once made, Provenchère dreamed of a quiet retirement at Orleans.

We do not know if he made it back to France. By 1792, however, he and his associate Barbaroux owned a sugar habitation of 17 *pièces* (ca 60 carreaux or 68 hectares) and 176 slaves. Unfortunately, a slave revolt in all the *ateliers* of the plain in March had caused all the whites to flee. In August the revolt was over (for the moment) and the returning *gérants* assessed the damage. Like most of the other planters in Cul-de-Sac, Provenchère had lost most of his livestock, some mules but only 10 *nègres*. The *gérant*, previously *raffineur* on the marquis's land, reported that all the papers and titles had been pilaged by the mulattoes and slaves. The *gérant* was proud to have saved some of the sugar and even sent some "à l'adresse de M. Provenchère à Philadelphie". This was August, 1792.

Charles Louis Robion had been general manager for the La Roche-foucauld plantations for five years while Provenchère was in France, 1778-83. These were war years and very difficult ones on the island. Robion had to sell his sugar to the "Anglo-Americans" and the neutrals and stock the rest. His accounts show no profits until 1782, when some convoys could be organized, though at very high freight and insurance rates. Robion was therefore on his own for five years. The marquis accused him of using some of the plantation revenue to buy land of his own. The marquis's suspicions were increased by Provenchère's observation, when he returned to Cul-de-Sac, that Robion kept too many black domestics in the *grande case* when they could be working in the fields, a mean criticism from a colleague. There were other reasons, however, to suspect Robion. In these same years he had built up a fortune valued at almost 600,000 livres in land and slaves. He moved from indigo, to coffee, to sugar, making a "bonne affaire" on each transaction and borrowing on very long-term. At the same time, he was *procurer gérant* of three *sucreries* owned by commercial firms in Europe. There was a flamboyant side to Robion. In his defense, he quoted Voltaire: "Les envieux mourront, mais l'envie ne mourra jamais." Fortunately, he had support from Bretton des Chapelles, solid local notable and personal friend of the marquis. Bretton said Robion was honest and that his *ménage* was not too large. Still, Robion left the habitation, concerned more about his reputation than his income on the island. He pleaded for the marquis's confidence.

...Now I have spent 12 years on your property... My stay on Saint-Domingue will be, to my great regret, much longer than I had foreseen. Today I have a wife and children. I must look out for their

well-being and leave them a solid fortune... Peace is here now. God grant that it may last a long time. Saint-Domingue will soon flourish. The Anglo-Americans will come to trade in our waters and will buy our products. The price of our syrups has already gone up...

Robion's ambitions for his future differ in some measure from those of Provenchère. Retirement in France is not explicit here and there is a certain enthusiasm, not only for making a personal fortune, but also for the prosperity of the island in general. Robion liked the Anglo-Americans' shameless zest for commerce and profit. Still, his *sejour* has been prolonged, much to his regret. In the end, like Provenchère, he too would like to retire to the metropole.

Perhaps Saint-Domingue was indeed developing a creole culture distinctly its own. But it was not among *gérants* like Nicolas Provenchère and Charles-Louis Robion that it would grow and flourish, even less among absentee owners like Marquis de La Rochefoucauld. There was neither time nor desire to look out over the cane fields and the majestic mountains beyond from the gallery of the *grande case* and muse sentimentally about being a "Franco-American" and passing on the plantation to one's grandchildren. "Vareux" and "les Sources" did not evoke the sentiments of the "Tara" of Scarlet O'Hara. No, surely the creoles lived elsewhere—perhaps on the highlands and in the towns of the island. For those like Provenchère and Robion, Saint-Domingue was indeed the "Pearl of the Antilles", but a pearl to be worn in Paris or Orleans and nowhere else.



Ilustración tomada de Rene Perin, *L'incendie du Cap, ou le régime de Toussaint-Louverture* (Paris, 1802). (Colección Alfred Nemours).

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