The Voyage of the Plant Nursery, 
H.M.S. Providence, 1791–1793

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INTRODUCTION

I first discovered letters and other documents pertaining to the breadfruit story while I was seeking information on plants which had been introduced into Jamaica. These documents form part of the Brabourne collection of Banks papers and are located along with the Tobin Journal on H.M.S. Providence 1791–93 in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, Australia. The letters were written to Sir Joseph Banks, who had organized the expedition for taking breadfruit from the South Seas to the West Indies, by (among others) James Wiles and Christopher Smith, botanist-gardeners on the Providence; Dr. Arthur Broughton, a physician of Kingston, Jamaica; and Dr. Thomas Dancer, the Island Botanist.

After I had obtained a copy of these letters and the part of Tobin’s journal relevant to the West Indies, I thought it advisable to combine information they contained with material I had found during my research in the West India Reference Library of the Institute of Jamaica and the Widener Library of Harvard University, to reconstruct and make available a more complete picture of Bligh’s very successful introduction of breadfruit into the British West Indies.

Special mention must be made of another important source of information, Ida Lee’s Captain Bligh’s Second Voyage to the South Sea, which is based mainly on Captain Bligh’s log.

NECESSITY FOR THE VOYAGE

The breadfruit was taken to the British West Indies for the first time in 1793 by Captain William Bligh on H.M.S. Providence, accompanied by Lieutenant Nathaniel Portlock on the Assistant. Though at first the inhabitants of these islands were slow in acquiring a taste for the fruit, it has long since become an integral part of their diet. In rural areas, breadfruit in its season is eaten three times a day.

Today the importance of Bligh’s expedition is not usually fully appreciated. It is important to remember that until the 1770’s there was no breadfruit crop, no mango crop, not even a sizeable banana crop, only plaintains, maize, and ground provisions in the West Indies; and since this was insufficient, a large portion of the food consumed in the islands came from continental North America. At best this was an expensive way to feed the large slave population, and during the American War of Independence when only British ships were allowed to trade with the British West Indies, the American food supply was cut off. These conditions prevailed until 1796 and the situation was worsened by natural disasters as the following extract from Bryan Edward’s History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies (1793) will show.

I have now before me a report of a committee of the assembly of Jamaica, on the subject of the slave trade, wherein the loss of negroes in that island, in consequence of those awful concussions of nature [earthquakes], and the want...
of supplies from America, is incidentally stated. It is a document of the best authority and... will, I hope, serve as an awful lesson to future ministers how they suffer the selfishness of party, and the prejudice of personal resentment, to have an influence in the national councils.

"We shall now (say the committee) point out the principal causes to which this mortality of our slaves is justly chargeable. It is but too well known to the house, that in the several years 1780, 1781, 1784, 1785, and 1786, it pleased Divine Providence to visit this island with repeated hurricanes, which spread desolation throughout most parts of the island; but the parishes which suffered more remarkably than the rest were those of Westmoreland, Hanover, Saint James, Trelawny, Portland, and Saint Thomas in the East. By these destructive visitations, the plantain walks, which furnish the chief article of support to the negroes, were generally rooted up, and the intense droughts which followed destroyed those different species of ground provisions which the hurricanes had not reached. The storms of 1780 and 1781 happening during the time of war, no foreign supplies, except a trifling assistance from prize-vessels, could be obtained on any terms, and a famine ensued in the leeward parts of the island, which destroyed many thousand negroes. After the storm of the 30th of July, 1784, the Lieutenant-governor, by the advice of his council, published a proclamation dated the 7th of August permitting the free importation of provisions and lumber in foreign bottoms for four months from that period. As this was much too short a time to give sufficient notice, and obtain all the supplies that were necessary, the small quantities of flour, rice and other provisions, which were imported in consequence of the proclamation, soon rose to so exorbitant a price as to induce the assembly, on the 9th of November following, to present an address to the Lieutenant-governor requesting him to prolong the term until the latter end of March 1785; observing, that it was impossible for the natural production of the country to come to such maturity as to be wholesome food, before that time. The term of four months not being expired when this address was presented, the Lieutenant-governor declined to comply therewith; but on the 1st of December following, the house represented that a prolongation of the term was then absolutely necessary: They observe that, persuaded of the reluctance with which His Honour would be brought to deviate from regulations which he felt bound to observe, it would give them much concern to address him on the same occasion a second time, were they not convinced that it was in a case of such extreme necessity as to justify such a deviation. Accordingly, the Lieutenant Governor, by the advice of his Majesty's council, directed, that the time formerly limited should be extended to the 31st of January then next ensuing (1785): but, at the same time, he informed the house that he was not at liberty to deviate any longer from the regulations which had been established in Great Britain.

From the 31st of January, 1785, therefore, the ports continued shut, and the sufferings of the poor negroes, in consequence thereof, for some months afterwards were extreme: Providentially, the seasons became more favourable about May, and considerable quantities of corn and ground provisions were gathered in by the month of August; when the fourth storm happened, and the Lieutenant Governor immediately shut the ports against the exportation of any of our provisions to the French and Spanish Islands, which were supposed to have suffered more than ourselves; but not thinking himself at liberty to permit the importation of provisions in American vessels, the productions of the country were soon exhausted, and the usual attendants of scanty and unwholesome diet, dropsies and epidemic dysenteries, were again dreadfully prevalent in the