

## Gold versus Life: Jobbing Gangs and British Caribbean Slavery

*By Nicholas Radburn and Justin Roberts*

Jobbing gangs—large groups of enslaved people who were principally hired out to dig sugarcane holes—were a crucial component of the British Caribbean slave economy. Emerging first in the early eighteenth century, they comprised approximately 10 percent of enslaved people in the British Caribbean by the late eighteenth century before declining after the abolition of the slave trade. The growth in jobbing gangs stemmed from elite sugar planters' desires to temporarily augment their permanent captive labor force, boost productivity, and simultaneously preserve the health of their own enslaved laborers. The enormous profits that middling whites could earn by buying captive Africans and hiring them out as a jobbing gang accelerated social mobility in the islands. The captives whom these whites enslaved were highly mobile, enabling them to escape the confines of a single plantation. But they also experienced some of the worst working and living conditions of any enslaved people in the Americas, exposing significant inequalities among British Caribbean slaves. Examining the origins, operation, and eventual decline of jobbing gangs thus reveals the British Caribbean sugar economy as an insidiously adaptable institution that combined the flexibility of wage labor with the unmitigated violence of racial slavery.