

BOOK CLUB GUIDE



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The Summer Country Reading Group Guide

1. In the first chapter, Emily tells us that “her grandfather had always said she was the most like him.” What did that mean to her at the start of the book? What might it mean to her by the end, when she has learned more of her grandfather’s life story?
2. When Emily is shocked to learn that London Turner—himself born into slavery—had owned slaves, his nephew Dr. Braithwaite challenges her: “Should my uncle be subject to sterner censure than the man who owned [Peverills]? Or, for that matter, than those who traded in sugar, knowing whence it came?” What do you think?
3. Charles tells Jenny: “My father always said that the institution of slavery is a disease that sickens owner and owned alike—but so much worse for the owner, who has choice in the matter. To own another person corrupts one.” Do you believe this, as Charles seems to? What does it mean that Charles’s father believed it yet continued to enslave people? How are the other plantation owners in the book corrupted by the fact that they own people? How does this reflect on Charles himself?
4. Charles and his father both have children with enslaved women. How are their circumstances—and the way they treat the women involved—different? How are they similar?
5. When Jenny and Mary Anne are teenagers, they carefully stick together in order to protect themselves from the danger posed by Mary Anne’s Uncle John. What happens after marriage frees Mary Anne? Does that newfound freedom change her relationship with Jenny?
6. Mary Anne attempts to free herself from the threat of her uncle by marrying Robert Davenant. But after marriage she discovers she still has little control of her life and fortune and is still very much under threat. Were there any good options available to nineteenth century women?
7. Dr. Braithwaite says of Mary Anne: “If you ask anyone, they’ll tell you that Mrs. Davenant was a good mistress—by the standards by which people judge their own.” How would you judge Mary Anne? What might Jenny, or Charles, or Jonathan Fenty say?
8. After Robert’s death, Charles thinks “They had killed Robert. Or had Robert killed himself? Fate or free will, divine judgment or the mere consequence of one choice leading to another and another and another, until the weight of those choices collapsed on one, bearing one down.” What do you think?
9. Why does Jenny tell Bussa to burn Beckles to the ground? Would you have done the same?
10. Mary Anne tells Emily “You’ve come to be a judgement to me. Or to put things right. One or the other. Unless they’re one and the same.” What do you think Emily’s presence at Beckles means for Mary Anne?
11. When the truth dawns on Emily that she is Jenny’s granddaughter, she thinks “The truth was that she didn’t want to believe that might have been her grandmother in the picture. It was one thing to go to a lecture and account herself enlightened...but quite another to imagine oneself in shackles, bought and sold because of the color of her skin.” Does it matter that Emily was raised by abolitionists? Does that help her to accept the truth about her mother and grandmother?
12. Emily is determined to marry Nathaniel Braithwaite, who is also descended from enslaved people, but unlike her, his family history is unmistakable. Do you think she would have been just as willing to marry him had she not known about her own heritage?
13. What do you think will happen when Emily goes to Paris? What kind of welcome will she find there?
14. What do you think will happen to Emily and Nathaniel, Laura and George, Charles and Jenny, in the years after this novel ends? What kind of future do you see for them? Where do you see their descendants today?



✧ BARBADOS ✧
(CIRCA 1817)

A Conversation with Lauren Willig about

— *The Summer Country* —

Q. How did your background as a history PhD candidate help you research the historical backdrop of *The Summer Country*?

A. Things my PhD work taught me: how to consume just enough coffee to keep you awake but not enough to make you jittery; how to find that one sticky note in a giant pile of reference books; and how to create a bibliography.

When it came to that last item, creating a bibliography, here was what I took away from those seven years in academia....

Follow the footnotes. There is no shame in hunting down someone else's sources. I've found this technique particularly useful in terms of working backwards from secondary to primary sources. Even a short article in an academic journal can be an absolute goldmine in terms of references (especially when the endnotes are as long as the article itself!).

Love for librarians. One of the best pieces of advice my advisor ever gave me, on my first week of grad school was, "Always make friends with librarians." As in so many other things, he was absolutely right. I couldn't have written this book without the help of the amazing Vicki Parsons, research librarian extraordinaire, who tracked down obscure articles, journals, memoirs, and letter collections for me. So much of the texture and detail in this book is down to her.

It's okay to go to the experts and admit ignorance. My Modern Britain advisor once told me, "You don't have to know everything; you just need to know where to look for it." That came as a shock to me at the time, fresh out of memorizing facts to regurgitate on exams. Now, I take it as a mantra. I was shameless about phoning friends while I was researching this book. One of my closest friends from grad school, now a professor at NYU, is currently writing a book about slavery in the Caribbean. She directed me to the latest research in the field, the scholars whose work I absolutely MUST read, including conference papers not quite in print yet and various works in progress, and fielded random questions at odd intervals by such deeply professional methods as text and Facebook chat. Another grad school friend, a historian of science, with whom I starred in a memorable (for "memorable" read "dreadful but so much fun") fake-British-accent run of the Stoppard play *Arcadia* during our second year of grad school, pointed me towards colleagues who specialized in eighteenth and nineteenth century Caribbean medical topics and offered introductions as needed. I hit up another Harvard history department colleague for help on nineteenth century British perceptions of race and otherness, and basically made a nuisance of myself to anyone I had ever known who worked on related topics. I am so grateful to all of them. (And it's okay; the book is done. You can stop blocking my calls!)

Q. What surprised you the most in researching this book?

A. The first surprise was just how different Barbados is from the other sugar islands. It became a commonplace that whenever I opened a survey on the Caribbean and the sugar islands, it would invariably say, "... except for Barbados." It's not that there aren't commonalities. There are. But there are also staggering demographic and cultural differences that meant that I had to scrub away everything I thought I knew about the sugar islands and focus narrowly and exclusively on material specifically from and about Barbados. So if you've read *The Book of Night Women* or *The Wide Sargasso Sea*—they're set in Jamaica, not Barbados, and were on the long list of items I consciously had to block out while working on *The Summer Country*.

In terms of other surprises, one of the biggest shockers was learning that many Barbados planters lobbied for the

abolition of the slave trade. But that last word is the clue. It was the trade they wanted stopped, not slavery itself, and the reasons behind their support for Wilberforce had very little to do with the horrors of the Middle Passage. Due to various demographic anomalies (long story short, Barbados was the only sugar island where there were more women than men, including in the enslaved population), and a shift to a policy known as amelioration (which boiled down to “maybe it’s bad business to work our expensive assets to death”), Barbados boasted a positive birthrate. This was not true of the other sugar islands. So, by pushing for the abolition of the slave trade, Barbados planters could cripple their economic rivals without feeling the pinch themselves. Once the debate shifted from abolition of the slave trade to emancipation, the story was, unsurprisingly, very different.

Q. What true events or characters is this book based on?

A. In terms of events, the 1816 rising (commonly known as Bussa’s Rebellion) and the 1854 cholera epidemic were both real happenings. The “May Dust” of 1812, when ash rained down on Barbados, was also drawn from real life. Other than the introduction of my own fictional people, I’ve tried to keep as close to the historical record as I could. You can find a detailed rundown of what happened, who the real actors were, and the places I had to improvise in the Historical Note at the back of the book.

My characters tend to be a pastiche of real people, and it’s particularly true in the case of this book. I’ll borrow a bit from here and a bit from there. This book started with a true story: the heart-breaking tale of a child who died in a fire, the “Portuguese ward” of the plantation owner. The difference? In that (real) story, there were two children involved, the fire was caused by lightning rather than arson, and it occurred during the 1830s, not 1816.

In fleshing out these characters, I stole extensively from the life of a plantation owner and reformer named Joshua Steele, who was the source of all of Charles’s and his father’s ideas. He was also, like Charles, in the unhappy position of being unable to manumit his own children, who legally belonged to another man (his executor attempted to forge manumission papers, and nearly got away with it, but that’s a whole other story). In constructing Jenny, I borrowed from the lives of Dolly and Jenny Lane, enslaved women on Newton Plantation; from Mary Ann Ashby, a bodyservant on Burkes Plantation; and from Nanny Grigg, one of the women involved in the planning of Bussa’s Rebellion.

Other true characters I shamelessly copied included London Bourne, a former slave who rose to prominence in the Afro-Caribbean merchant aristocracy of Bridgetown (and if you’re wondering if that’s why London Turner was named London Turner, it is!) and Africanus Horton, who, like Nathaniel, studied medicine in London and Edinburgh in the 50s. And don’t even get me started on the Victorian reformers who inspired Emily....

Q. There are two interracial love stories in *The Summer Country*, one that takes place before slavery is abolished and one that takes place after. What are the challenges for modern writers—particularly white writers—when it comes to writing about interracial love in the 19th century Caribbean?

A. Where to begin? There are two sets of interracial love stories in *The Summer Country*, one between an enslaved woman and a neighboring plantation owner, the other between a middle class Englishwoman and an Afro-Caribbean doctor. In writing about Charles and Jenny, I found myself struck by the limitations of language. One of my models for Charles and Jenny was Joshua Steele and his—his what? The term “mistress” is a loaded word. Lover? Also problematic. It implies an emotional attachment, a choice. What language do we have for a relationship where the female doesn’t have the power to refuse? Even “relationship” feels presumptuous. Is it a relationship where one party can’t say no? How do we gauge individual sentiment under those constraints, especially where we have so few firsthand documents? Is it possible to genuinely have affection—love, even—where one party has power of life and death over the other? The biggest challenge for me was redressing that balance. How do you make two people in that situation genuinely lovers, in love? That Charles didn’t own Jenny was part of it, although only a small part—merely by being male and white, he still has power over her. The larger part lay in their own characters. In every possible way, Jenny is the stronger of the two; Charles is a romantic, and something of a ditherer. He also, as the story unfolds, becomes very aware of the limitations of his own power. For all his privilege, he can do nothing to free the woman he loves. The fact that Charles can’t save Jenny, that Jenny has to—and does—act for herself, is

part of what made their relationship possible for me.

Writing Emily and Nathaniel posed a whole other set of challenges. There was no societal bar to Jenny and Charles's relationship; it was distressingly common for planters to take enslaved women as mistresses. The reverse is true of Emily and Nathaniel. One of the things that struck me forcibly while writing about Emily and Nathaniel was just how much Nathaniel's and Emily's worlds mirror each other, how familiar the Turner drawing room would feel to Emily, how similar Mrs. Turner's routine is to Aunt Millicent's round of committees and good works in Bristol. On paper, they're very much counterparts: the vicar's daughter and the doctor, the merchant's nephew and the merchant's granddaughter. Until you get to the question of race. This was an era where attitudes about race were changing in England, becoming less open. As women were increasingly put on pedestals; this is the height of the Victorian "angel of the hearth" mentality. They were used as exemplars of virtue and purity, so the Victorians anathematized the idea of relations between white women and men of color. It would be ahistorical for Emily, even as the child of abolitionists, not to realize that her feelings for Nathaniel are socially ruinous. How do you acknowledge the prejudices of an era without validating them? That's what I struggled with while writing Emily and Nathaniel.

Q. Did you visit Barbados while researching this novel?

A. I did and I didn't. That sounds crazy, doesn't it? Either one is someplace or one isn't. Unless you're Schrödinger's cat, but that's a whole other sackful of felines. The idea for this book first hit me roughly a decade ago. I was young and childless and able to do things like hop on a plane on a whim, so I took a trip to Barbados, where I toured plantations and got the worst mosquito bites of my life during a day spent at the Barbados Museum and Historical Society. I came back and presented my brilliant book proposal to my editor, who informed me it was a no go. No one would want to read a book set in the colonial Caribbean. I could write whatever I liked—so long as it was set in England. Preferably in the nineteenth century. I was a full time writer and I had bills to pay. So I wrote another book set in nineteenth century England and shelved the Barbados Book proposal and all the notes I'd taken in a folder I call "other plot ideas".

Fast forward to 2016, when three things happened: 1) my agent told me to stop talking about the Barbados Book and just write it already; 2) I discovered I was pregnant with my second child; 3) every newspaper in America started blasting warnings about Zika. I was finally, finally getting to write the book that had haunted me for years. But I was officially barred from Caribbean travel: see Zika, pregnancy, and "worst mosquito bites of my life", above. It was maddening; it was Murphy's Law; it was what it was.

The past is another country, they say, and that's never truer than when an author is trying to research physical locations. Over the course of nineteen books, I've learned that even when I am able to be on the spot for research, I still find myself relying heavily on contemporary maps, drawings, and letters, because buildings are torn down, streets are widened or rerouted, even the climate changes over time. By going to documents from that era, you get a much more reliable sense of what the location of your novel looked, sounded, and felt like at the time.

Devastating hurricanes leveled Bridgetown in 1780 and 1831; fires ravaged what was left. The city was rebuilt and rebuilt and rebuilt again. Fortunately, there is no dearth of material on the city as it was in its various incarnations, in my case, the 1810s and 1850s. I am deeply indebted to Warren Alleyne's *Historic Bridgetown*, which clearly and methodically lays out what was where when—with maps! Contemporary travel narratives were also a great boon. There are no dearth of books by eighteenth century naval men and globetrotting Victorians who memorialized their travels in print. Fortunately for me, many of them visited Barbados and provided precise accounts of everything from their hotel accommodations in Bridgetown to their visits to plantations to the mandatory trip to scenic "Scotland", the hilly countryside in the parish of St. Andrew.

Of course, some buildings have survived, and many physical landmarks are still landmarks. I wasn't able to go back to St. Nicholas Abbey or Sunbury Plantation or visit the waters of Bathsheba while I was writing this book, but I followed in the footsteps of dozens of others through the lenses of their phones, which was sometimes a bit choppy, but incredibly useful. It's amazing what you can find on YouTube these days. Although it's always much more fun to go in person!

Photo inspiration for
—❧— *The Summer Country* ❧—

❧ P E V E R I L L S ❧

Peverills Plantation was inspired by St. Nicholas Abbey (pictured below: exterior and dining room) and Drax Hall Plantation, famed as rare survivals of the Jacobean style on Barbados. Both were built in the 1650s.





The ruins of the Farley Hill great house (pictured above) inspired Emily's first view of the burned out towers of Peverills.

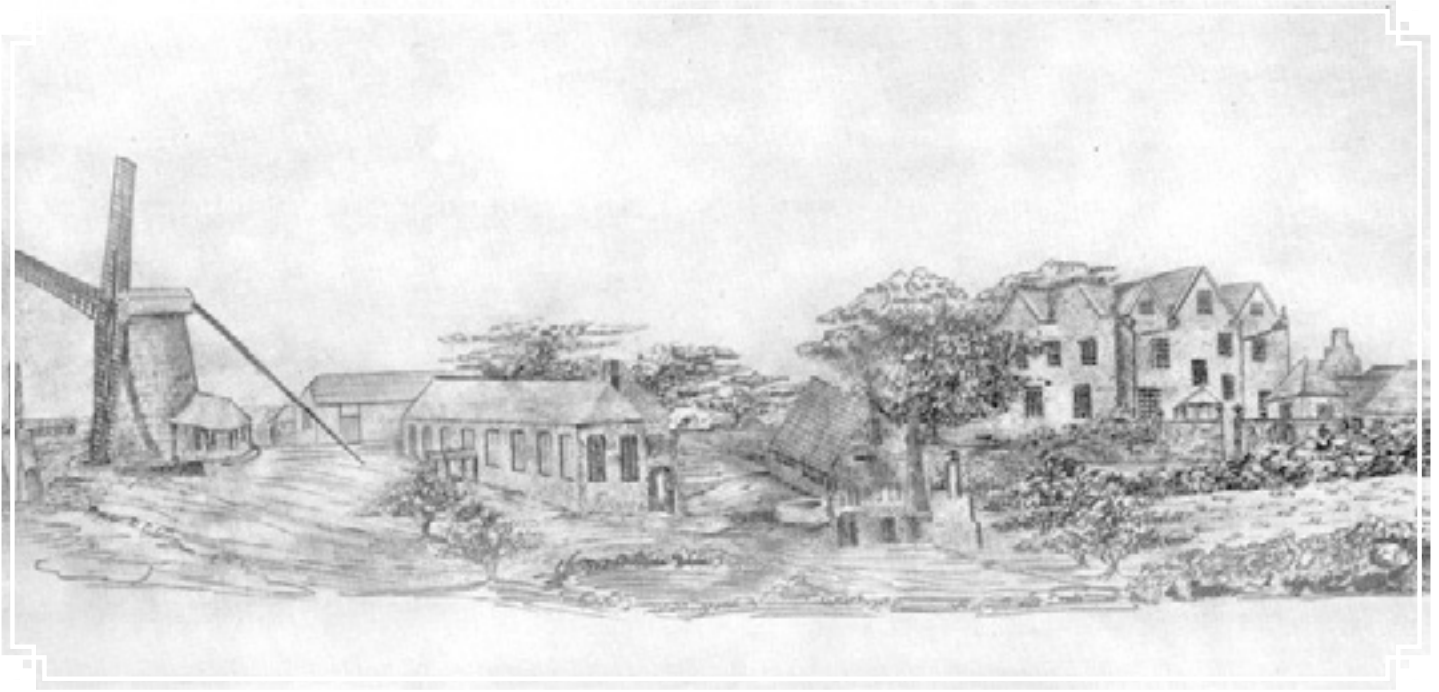
❖ BECKLES ❖

Beckles, on the other hand, was based closely on Sunbury Plantation (pictured below). Built in the 1660s, Sunbury exemplifies the archetypal Barbados plantation house.



❖ PLANTATION LIFE ❖

Set apart from the grandeur of the great house, separated by shrubbery, one would find the mill, boiling house, and the rest of the apparatus of sugar production.



❖ BRIDGETOWN ❖

This is Bridgetown as Emily would have seen it upon her arrival in 1854 (the pictures above are from 1848).
Bridgetown suffered multiple rounds of hurricane and fire, and was rebuilt again and again.



RECIPES

Want to know exactly what it was the characters in *The Summer Country* were eating and drinking? Here are some modern adaptations of those classic Bajun recipes (with some historical commentary for context.)

Enjoy!

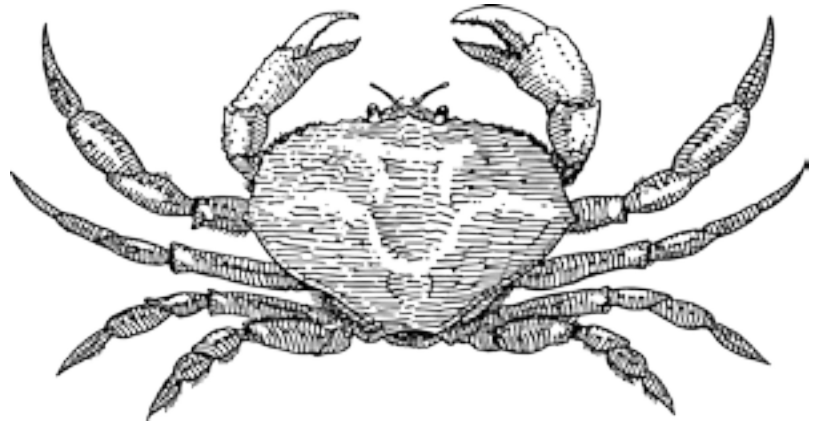
PEPPER-POT

This was described by an Englishwoman who visited Barbados in 1854 as “a kind of gypsy pot au feu, things being added by the day.”

There are many variants, some containing chicken and duck as well as beef and pork, others substituting goat or mutton. Many involve a sauce called casareep, made from cassava root, which an English visitor in 1854 described as “a condiment resembling Harvey’s sauce and anchovy”.

Here is one of the simpler versions:

- Place 2lbs beef stew cubes in a mixing bowl with lemon juice or lime juice
- Boil a large pot of water; add 2 pigs’ trotters (alternatively, cubed pork leg or shoulder) and 2 lbs cubed ox tail
- Drain water, add marinated beef cubes, and cover with fresh (hot) water
- Add 3 cloves chopped garlic, 1 chopped onion, 2 finely chopped scotch bonnet peppers, 1 cinnamon stick, 2 cloves, basil, thyme, and salt and sugar to taste
- Simmer for an extended period of time



STUFFED LAND CRAB

Our 1854 visitor comments: “While on the subject of cooking and eating, I must not forget to mention one of the greatest delicacies in the West Indian cuisine, namely ‘land crabs’.... They come in swarms at one part of the year, and cross over the land. They go over everything in their way, not turning aside for houses, but go up the walls and across the roof.... They are, when stuffed and well seasoned, remarkably good eating.”

- Clean crabs; boil for half an hour
- Remove the meat. (Save the shells to use for serving.)
- Saute 1 onion (chopped) and 1 garlic clove (minced) in 2tbsp oil; add crab meat
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Add 2 tbsp lemon juice, one chopped shallot, 1 tsp hot pepper sauce, 2 tbsp breadcrumbs, and 1 tbsp butter; combine and cool.
- Fill the reserved shells with crab mixture
- Combine 2 tbsp bread crumbs and 1 tbsp butter; use to top crab
- Bake at 350 for 15-20 minutes

— ❧ — RECIPES (cont.) ❧ —

SUBALTERN'S BUTTER

Just in case you thought millennials were the first to have invented avocado toast....

Butter was scarce and expensive in nineteenth century Barbados. So what to put on your bread? Voila! The flesh of the "aguacate pear", known to us as an avocado.

Here's our useful 1854 correspondent on the topic: "I have taken some trouble to try and obtain some reliable information as to how aguacate should be spelt, but I am by no means sure even now that I have succeeded. By some it is called avocado, by others aguacada, and lastly aguacate.... The English people, however, cut the Gordian knot by calling it by the singular appellation of 'subaltern's butter'.... Butter is not very good and is very dear in the West India islands, but this aguacate pear makes a very good substitute, and at very small cost. The taste is very like ordinary fresh butter into which a little oil has been mixed. Eaten with plenty of bread it is very good, or made into a salad, as we had it today, with a little salt, pepper, mustard, and vinegar, but it is far too rich to eat alone as a fruit."

Preparation instructions:

- Peel avocado. Mash. Apply to bread.

PUNCH

An eighteenth century visitor to the island described the local tippie of choice as: "Rum, Water, Lime-juice, Sugar, and a little Nutmeg scrap'd on the top of it."

A common rhyme has it:

*One of sour, two of sweet,
three of strong, four of weak,
A dash of bitters and a sprinkle of spice,
serve well chilled with plenty of ice.*

What this translates to is...

- 1 part lime juice
- 2 parts simple syrup
- 3 parts Barbados dark rum
- 4 parts water

Garnish with a bit of grated nutmeg, give someone else your car keys, and enjoy!

GINGER BEER

If you prefer something a little less intoxicating....

- Grate 4 peeled ginger roots.
- Juice 2 limes or 1 lemon.
- Combine ginger, lime juice, 4 cloves, 1 cinnamon stick, and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar in a gallon jar.
- Add 10 cups of boiling water, stir until sugar is dissolved, and set aside to cool
- Cover. Refrigerate for seven days.
- Strain through cheesecloth.
- Add additional $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar.
- Serve.



HIDDEN HISTORY

Links to Other Resources (Digital)

If you want to dip deeper into some of the historical events referenced in this book, here are a collection of digital resources that will deliver you there from the comfort of your own desk chair.

1. To learn more about plantation life, both pre and post emancipation, check out the Newton Plantation Collection, a digital archive of the records of Newton Plantation in Christ Church, Barbados, including an 1828 Slave List and an 1854 Day Book: <http://lcdl.library.cofc.edu/content/newton-plantation-collection>
2. For those interested in the 1816 rising, you can see images of the flags carried during Bussa's Rebellion in Steven Knowlton's work on the symbolism of flags in new world slave risings: https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/steven.a.knowlton/files/knowlton_slave_risings_flags.pdf
3. Want to know more about the details of and the debates around Bussa's Rebellion? The University of Exeter has made available Lilian McNaught's thesis on the topic: https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/31536/McNaughtL_TPC.pdf
4. Emily's experiences during the 1854 cholera epidemic in Bridgetown were closely based on this firsthand account: <https://archive.org/details/mordichimrecolle00butc/page/n6>
5. Everything you ever wanted to know about Barbados's history is available through the excellent Barbados Museum and Historical Society (the *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society* was invaluable in writing this book): <http://www.barbmuse.org.bb/web/>



READING LIST



(Print)

Start with: Andrea Stuart's *Sugar in the Blood: A Family's Story of Slavery and Empire*.

This engaging social history traces the author's family, landowners and enslaved people, from the early days of sugar cultivation on Barbados through the present day. It provides a wonderful overview through a personal lens.

If you would like to read more, I suggest:

- For general Barbados history: Hilary McD. Beckles's *A History of Barbados*.
- In a larger context: Matthew Parker's *The Sugar Barons: Family, Corruption, Empire, and War in the West Indies*.
- For a window into Jenny's world: Hilary McD. Beckles's *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Women in Barbados* or Marisa J. Fuentes's *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*.
- Looking more closely at Charles and his peers: David Lambert's *White Creole Culture, Politics, and Identity during the Age of Abolition*.
- To learn more about London Turner's world: Melanie J. Newton's *The Children of Africa in the Colonies: Free People of Color in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation*.
- On the 1816 rising: Hilary McD Beckles's *Bussa: The 1816 Revolution in Barbados*.
- An eyewitness account of the 1854 cholera epidemic (conveniently digitized and available on the internet!): the Reverend Thomas Butcher's *Mordichim: Recollections of Cholera in Barbados During the Middle of the Year 1854*.

You can find a much, much longer bibliography on my website at
www.laurenwillig.com/books/the-summer-country