Liberties Lost

The Indigenous Caribbean and Slave Systems

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Norma Joy Lazarus (d. 1982)

and to

The people of Haiti on the occasion of the bicentenary of Haitian independence
(1804 – 2004)
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>vi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 1 The indigenous Caribbean people | 1

1 | The culture of indigenous Caribbean people | 2
2 | The Ciboney | 5
3 | The Taino | 5
4 | The Kalinago | 15
5 | Continental cousins: Maya, Aztec and Inca | 19

### 2 The European-Caribbean Project | 28

1 | The first 'American' journeys before Columbus | 29
2 | Asia and the Crusades | 29
3 | The Portuguese in West Africa | 32
4 | Colonising the islands in the East Atlantic | 33
5 | The Columbus project | 33

### 3 Spanish settlement and indigenous resistance | 36

1 | Lost in the Caribbean | 37
2 | Spanish colonial policy and settlement patterns | 39
3 | The oppression and enslavement of the Taino | 40
4 | Taino resistance | 43
5 | Spanish political and economic systems in the Caribbean | 44

### 4 Other European settlement and rivalry | 51

1 | The challenge to Spanish monopoly by other European nations | 52
2 | The ways in which European nations challenged the Spanish monopoly | 60
3 | The Spanish counter-attack | 65
4 | The resistance of the Kalinago in the Eastern Caribbean | 65

### 5 Europe and the spread of chattel slavery in Africa | 69

1 | Classical Africa in comparison with Europe | 70
2 | Early African development: African scientific and technological developments | 71
3 | The main West African states in the mid-15th Century: Ghana, Mali and Songhai | 74
4 | The decline of White slavery | 75
5 | The rise of slavery in Africa | 76
6 | The impact of the transatlantic human trade on Africa | 79

### 6 The transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans | 82

1 | The commercial and financial organisation of the trade in humans | 83
2 | Prices and profits in the trade | 84
3 | The debate over the size of the trade and the main participants | 88
4 | The Middle Passage and the mortality rate of Africans | 89
5 | Resistance by Africans to the transatlantic human trade | 94
6 | The impact of the trade on Africa, Europe and the Americas | 96

### 7 The Caribbean economy and enslavement | 99

1 | The sugar revolution | 100
2 | The sugar industry grows | 100
3 | White indentured servants | 101
4 | The planters clamp down | 101
5 | Servant resistance | 101
6 | Enslaved Africans and production | 102
7 | Control of Africans | 111

### 8 Making and marketing sugar | 121

1 | Making sugar | 122
2 | Marketing sugar | 133
Introduction

If you know your history, then you would know where you’re coming from; then you wouldn’t have to ask me: who the hell do you think I am.

Bob Marley

The audience for this book

This book, like its companion volume, Freedoms Won, aims to help teachers and students in their journeys through the Caribbean history syllabus offered by the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC). The two books accommodate the entire CXC history programme, including the new syllabus in Caribbean/Atlantic history known as CAPE (Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examinations).

Both volumes will be of value to students and teachers engaged in the Cambridge ‘A’ level syllabus on the post-slavery history of the Caribbean. They should also be of use to college/university students participating in foundation courses in Caribbean history, as well as to the general reader seeking information on the history of the region.

The focus of this book

The indigenous Caribbean people

We begin with a focus on the indigenous Caribbean societies, and move on to the slave systems that were built by European colonisers. The first Caribbean people created societies that were complex in culture. Some of these societies shared common beliefs and practices. The development of these societies was undermined when the Europeans arrived in the Caribbean, beginning with Christopher Columbus’ mission of 1492. After this, six European nations fought the indigenous people and won control of territory in the region.

Europe’s Caribbean project

Spain, France, England, Holland and Denmark had the greatest impact upon Caribbean societies. Sweden was a minor coloniser and did much less to reshape the region. These imperial powers established and developed large- and small-scale settlements and trade networks. They succeeded despite protest and violent opposition from the indigenous people who tried to protect their lands, liberty and lives by all the means available to them. In general, the resistance of indigenous people was not as effective as intended; the result was the overthrow and reorganisation of the traditional Caribbean world.

European settlement and rivalry

An important outcome of the European settlement was that it militarily defeated, enslaved, and mass murdered the indigenous people. A few communities survived this genocide. They are now scattered mostly within the interior areas of Guiana and Suriname, in parts of Central America, and in the Eastern Lesser Antilles. They are still an oppressed and marginalised people, who still seek respect for their cultural identity and independence.

The rapid destruction of indigenous communities in the Greater Antilles and their continued armed struggle in the Lesser Antilles, meant that the European settlers did not have the quantity of servile labour force they desired. So, the European settlers used two main systems of labour bondage – they imported indentured servants from the ‘old world’ of Europe and they used Africans as chattel enslaved.

The transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans

By the end of the 17th century, White indentured workers were no longer so important. Now the Europeans mainly used enslaved Africans as the labour system with which they exploited the Caribbean. Over 12 million Africans were imported into colonial ‘America’ to achieve this end.

The mass enslavement of Africans in the East Atlantic islands happened before Columbus’ voyage to the Caribbean in the West Atlantic. The mass enslavement was a westward movement. It began in the mid-15th century with the establishment of large-scale chattel slavery in Madeira, an island in the East Atlantic. Here, Europeans built sugar plantations that became a model for the rest of the Caribbean. So the Madeira model was a launch pad for the wealth generating, life destroying machine - the Caribbean plantation.
Sugar and slavery
By the end of the 18th century, sugar plantations and African enslavement dominated the social and economic life of the Caribbean. The main driving force was the search for profits. In most places, the mining, coffee, cotton, cattle and tobacco industries were secondary to the main export staple, sugar.

The enslaved African population carried out many different tasks and experienced slavery in different ways. Many were artisans, fisherfolk, sailors, overseers, domestics, vendors, sugar technologists (boilers and distillers), soldiers, lumberjacks, builders, and entertainers. The vast majority, however, worked on sugar, cotton and coffee plantations, cattle and timber farms, and mines.

The type of work they did influenced the life of the enslaved populations in important ways, for example, their general health, life expectancy and social life. The enslaved were overworked, malnourished and physically and mentally brutalised. Poor health, physical exhaustion and psychological trauma contributed to the fact that more Black people died than were born. So for most of the period of slavery, the enslaved population could not increase naturally.

Enslaved workers were constantly badly affected by a range of nutritionally related diseases. The major killers were fevers and dysentery. Poor nutrition meant that they could not easily defend themselves from these diseases. As a result the death rate of the Black communities was far higher than the death rate of the White communities.

African culture and community life
Slavery did not stop Africans from surviving. They tried to survive by creating an independent social and economic life of their own. They demanded the ‘free’ use of leisure time, which they filled with activities that ranged from entertainment to selling goods, to family engagements. These activities came to symbolise the spirit of freedom that shaped their day-to-day resistance to slavery.

The work of enslaved Africans produced money and profits for their enslavers. The Caribbean economy included world trade and investment networks, and it generated a lot of money for colonisers. Much of this wealth was exported capital and it contributed greatly to the funding of industrial growth in Western Europe. However the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans and the wealth it produced in the Caribbean for colonisers led to the long-term economic decline of Western Africa. For over 300 years the Caribbean world was the centre of Europe’s global empire, the centre of a system of trade, finance and production.

Revolt and resistance
But life in the Caribbean was very insecure and unstable. Europeans fought each other for the largest share of loot, trade, power and status. The region was a theatre of war, both on land and at sea. It was known for its violence and turmoil. Black people fought for their freedom and so added to the violence that shaped social life everywhere. They were determined to uproot slavery and this meant that there was constant conflict between Black and White people.

Between 1791 and 1793 the enslaved people in the French colony of St Domingue won their freedom after a bloody civil war. Once they had won their social freedom they demanded political freedom from France. In 1804 they declared national independence and renamed the colony Haiti – the indigenous name for the island on which the nation emerged. Boukman Dutty, from Jamaica, and then Toussaint L’Ouverture and others led this freedom revolution. But it was Jean Jacques Dessalines who emerged as the country’s first president. Haiti became the second independent republic in the ‘New world’, following the United States of America. So Haiti was the first Caribbean nation.

The impact of Haiti on slavery everywhere was profound. It affected both the pro-slavery interests and the anti-slavery campaign. Slavery was deeply weakened. Black people all over the region tried to follow the example of armed self-liberation. The region became more unstable than ever as the number of rebellions increased.

After Haiti the rebellions of enslaved workers were more effectively planned and organised than those before. The rebellions expressed the growing desire for freedom among women and men, skilled and unskilled, old and young. The women especially forged links across generations, between those who worked in the fields and in the planters’ households. They used culture and religion to strengthen unity and to raise consciousness.

In the end, the slave system was brought down by a combination of anti-slavery rebellion in the Caribbean, the economic decline of the region’s sugar industry, and the increasing effectiveness of European parliamentary and public anti-slavery politics.

Caribbean emancipation
It took nearly 100 years to complete the process of general emancipation. It began with the self-liberation of Black people in Haiti in 1793 and ended with the abolition of slavery in the Spanish colonies in the 1880s. The process of emancipation was a major political and social undertaking by Africans, Europeans, and people of mixed racial origins. They all had a stake in uprooting the horrid slave system from modern life.
So, this book tries to summarise, and in some places narrate and illuminate, the literature on these aspects of Caribbean history. It relies upon the work of many historians whose published research informs our understanding of the subject. We have not always given the names of all these colleagues but we would like to think that what is presented here is in part a celebration of their efforts.

We have kept references and quotations to a minimum to facilitate easy reading. However, we take full responsibility for any shortcomings that have resulted. Finally, we hope that this text will serve to stimulate some students to follow the historian’s craft or at least become historians in spirit.

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H.McD.B./V.A.S.

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