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THE WEST INDIES: PATTERNS OF  
DEVELOPMENT, CULTURE AND  
ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE  
SINCE 1492

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# THE WEST INDIES: PATTERNS OF DEVELOPMENT, CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE SINCE 1492

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For Chris  
and his life ahead

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'Nothing that ever happens to man is natural, since his presence puts the  
whole world into question.'

Simone de Beauvoir

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## Preface

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Part of the Americas, the islands of the West Indies nevertheless stand out as a unique entity within them. Looking southwards from the shores of the United States, eastwards from Central America, or northwards from the coasts of Colombia or Venezuela, one is almost instinctively aware that ahead, cradled by the Caribbean Sea, lies a chain of territories, whose history, culture, environment and general atmosphere are different in several important respects from those of any found on the mainland. In their essential sympathies, they are neither wholly Latin American nor North American; and they are far from being any longer an extension of Europe in the New World. Unlike other parts of the continent, their aboriginal populations have long gone, except for a few miniscule remnants of mixed blood. The islands were the first to encounter the initial thrust of European expansion westward across the Atlantic in the guise of Hispanic conquistador enterprise; and they later bore the brunt of the movement by northwest European nations towards tropical plantation development. As a by-product of the latter, they participated in the greatest transfer of peoples in bondage from one continent (black Africa) to another that the world has known and then, after emancipation, they succeeded in drawing in immense numbers of contract workers from Asia and elsewhere as well. Each demographic group brought along with it elements of its own culture to incorporate into that of the new lands in which it settled; and each in turn quickly apprised itself of the fact that these same lands were almost devoid of all traces of their former, native cultural inheritance, leaving a vacuum which cried out to be filled. The groups intermingled widely, and were very fertile. The direct consequences of all this today are that, individually, all the West Indies islands have population densities as high as anywhere in the world outside of Southeast Asia, while together they provide a most cosmopolitan array of peoples of different origins and races, racial mixes, languages and cultures. Having said this, it must also be admitted that the extent of cultural intermingling in the region still is far from being complete.

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One of the paradoxes of West Indian life is that, despite the presence of a well-defined though only locally expressed 'creolism', which has been in existence since the latter part of the eighteenth century, and which has evolved substantially since then, incorporating segments of the introduced cultures as it did so, and modifying them to suit endemic situations, a true regional cultural identity common to all inhabitants has yet to emerge. No doubt delays in the inception of this have been caused at least in part by the continued persistence of colonial rule until the 1950s and later, in all but former Hispanic terrain (there, political independence was achieved earlier), and by the derived attachments to overseas metropolitan cultures, notably those of Britain and France, which this encouraged.

Distinctiveness also characterises the landscapes and environments of the island Caribbean. The sheer variety of physical landforms, the range of tropical climates, and the often unique wealth of plant and animal life (much of which, unhappily, now is under threat), all contribute to the sense of attraction and beneficence experienced by most visitors. It is also the case that the precise nature of the environment in each island is different in degree to that of its neighbours; and since environment in large measure has influenced the patterns of development, albeit within the constraints of the dominant resident culture group, this means further that the latter in turn vary widely. Moreover, development inevitably has modified the environment considerably from what it was in aboriginal times. In places, the speed and scale of habitat change attributable to development have been astonishing. But all the component islands may be regarded as being at the very least environmentally 'sensitive', and potentially vulnerable to damage induced by unrestrained exploitation. All told, a detailed consideration of the linkages between environment, the cultural perception of it, and the means and methods of development is more than usually timely, bearing in mind current world concerns with related issues, such as the causes of famine; and it is with these special themes that this work is concerned.

The nature of the material has determined to a large extent its arrangement under chapter headings. A review of the environment is presented in the first chapter, and in the next the settlement, land-use patterns and cultures of the aboriginal peoples are dealt with. Chapter 3 evaluates the aims and achievements of Hispanic intrusion and colonisation, and the effects of these, both on the pre-existing populations and on habitats. The establishment of early northwest European plantation colonies between 1625 and 1645 is examined in Chapter 4, and the beginnings of their conversion to sugar cane production in Chapter 5. Chapters 6 to 9 chart and analyse the extension of the sugar estate economy to virtually all West Indian territories between 1665 and 1833, when slave emancipation was effected in the British colonies. I make no apologies for the fact that these chapters form the bulk of the book, for it was in these years that many

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long-standing regional attitudes towards development and environment were formed, some of which are still prevalent. The prime concerns are the evolution of general development and trade; the relationships between sugar production and regional population growth; social characteristics, migration and the growth of towns; and then, agricultural innovation, along with environmental change. A discussion of post-1833 adjustments is accorded to Chapter 10, and this is followed by a concluding chapter, which considers briefly some twentieth-century trends, places the work in a broader, world perspective, and explores some of the related philosophical issues. Throughout, both primary and secondary documentary material is used to support the argument, along with that derived from my own field work.

As far as I am aware, this is the first book of this sort to be produced, set within the framework of the West Indies. There are perhaps very good reasons why this should be so, and some of these are indicated below. A vast amount of background information is necessary for its compilation, and this needs to be drawn not only from the physical and biological sciences, but also from the social sciences. Not all of the relevant documentation is easy to view, much of it being located in a range of libraries and vaults which are distributed widely not only in the Caribbean but also in North America and Europe: further, some of the vital, early manuscript sources have been lost over the years. Additionally, it is almost impossible to obtain a good sense of regional events without speaking and reading at least three of the four major languages used by residents. The number of countries to be considered is substantial, and field work within them is not entirely without problems at a practical level. I am fortunate to have been able to visit most of these territories, Haiti, the Cayman Islands and the US Virgin Islands excepted: in the latter two instances, no good opportunities have yet arisen to make the journey, and in the former immigration guards prevented the execution of a pre-arranged crossing by land from the Dominican Republic, an event which is far from being unique at the border post in question. In consequence of all this, data acquisition has taken up a good deal of research time off and on over the years, and its interpretation even more. On occasions too, the writing has taken on epic status, and I am exceedingly grateful to all those relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues who have provided both perspicacious assistance and general encouragement along the way.

It must also be made clear that this book in no way could have been put together without the more specific help granted by particular individuals and organisations. I especially acknowledge the interest in it displayed by the Governments of Antigua, Barbados, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, France, Jamaica, the Netherlands, St Kitts-Nevis and Trinidad and Tobago, all of whom have lent practical support in various ways. Gratitude is also

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extended to the several organisations which have provided funding for field and library research, which include the British Academy, the Canada Council, the Leverhulme Trust, McGill University, the National Research Council of Canada, the Royal Society and the University of Hull. Recognition is accorded to the directors and librarians of the several major depositories of documents which were utilised in data collection, namely Les Archives de la Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris; La Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; the British Museum; the House of Lords Library; the Library of Bridgetown (Barbados); McGill University Library; the Public Records Office, London; and the William Salt Library, Stafford. Additional thanks are due to those authors, research institutions and publishing companies who have granted permission for certain of their copyright diagrams and tables to be redrawn and modified for my own use, and I trust that an adequate reference to all who fall into this category has been given in the relevant captions.

It was as a graduate student in the Department of Geography at the University of California, Berkeley, that I first came under the spell of the West Indies, albeit at a distance, for I was then engaged in other research matters. There, under the tuition of Carl Sauer and James J. Parsons, I began to become aware of some of the intricate relationships between culture, environment and development which exist within the region. I am greatly indebted to these two scholars for the stimulus of their views, and many of their approaches and attitudes are reflected herein. From Berkeley, too, David Harris' work on the Outer Leeward Islands also raised my levels of interest. Curiously, although my initial contact with Caribbean territory took place at roughly the same time, it came about not as a matter of academic investigation, but under the auspices of summer vacation employment, as a deck-hand on board the general cargo vessel MS Rydboholm of the Swedish-America line, under the command of Captain Carlsen. Opportunities for a more purposeful return emerged later on, while preparing a doctorate for McGill University; and here, the influence of Kenneth Hare and Theo Hills was all important. At their initiative, five research students (David Brack, Jock Galloway, Frank Innes, John Mbogua and myself) spent the summer of 1960 in Barbados, based at the Bellairs Research Institute, and it was as a result of this venture that the work which eventually was to result in the production of this book really got under way. In Barbados, Graham Gooding and Colin Hudson (both then of the Barbados Sugar Producers' Association), John Lewis and Ivan Smith (then the Director and Deputy Director of Bellairs), the late E. M. Shilstone OBE, and Patrick Haynes (then of the Barbados Department of Science and Agriculture) all were especially helpful in the adjustment to West Indian life and conditions, the first of these also having enthusiastically converted me to a life-long absorption with matters relating to West

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Indian vegetation. Since then, both Jock Galloway (University of Toronto) and Frank Innes (University of Windsor) have provided invaluable advice and discussions from time to time, along with unfailing friendship. Others who deserve similar mention, and who were met later along the road, are Barbara Fredrich (University of San Diego), Jerry Handler (University of Southern Illinois), Janet Momsen (University of Newcastle upon Tyne), Peter Roebuck (University of Ulster) and Eric Waddell (Laval University, Quebec). Janet Denise, Judy Driscoll, Sarah Gaunt and Stanley Iton too gave generous back-up support when it was needed. I am also particularly grateful to Dr José J. Hungria of the University of San Domingo, the Dominican Republic, for his field introduction to the geography of that country during the CLAG meetings of 1982. As the manuscript grew, Alan Harris and David Richardson, respectively of the Department of Geography, and the School of Historical Studies, in the University of Hull, and Janet Momsen (above) have been kind enough to provide constructive criticisms of sections in it, along with the advisers of Cambridge University Press. None of the above are, of course, responsible for any deficiencies in the text which might remain. Last but by no means least, thanks are also given to the task force of technicians and secretaries who ultimately were responsible for putting the manuscript together, and among these special mention should be accorded to Keith Scurr, Tony Key and Andi Bolton of the Geography Department Drawing Office in the University of Hull, and to Peggy Williams and Margaret Kirtley, who cheerfully undertook the daunting task of typing the final draft copy.

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## Notes and abbreviations

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The following abbreviations are used in respect of manuscript collections:

BM	British Museum, London
BN	Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
<i>Cal. Col./</i>	
<i>CSPCS</i>	Catalogue of State Papers, Colonial Series (BM)
<i>CO</i>	Colonial Office Mss (PRO)
HLL	House of Lords Library, London
LBB	Library of Bridgetown, Barbados
PRO	Public Record Office, London

Spelling in the quotations taken from early printed and manuscript works is that of the original, and therefore may differ from that of the present day.

The basic units of measurement are metric, although others (e.g. Imperial units) are also given, where appropriate.