

1

CUBA, c. 1750–c. 1860

The Spanish colony of Cuba in the mid-eighteenth century was a largely forested, half unmapped island. It was known both to Spaniards and their enemies among other European empires primarily as the hinterland to Havana. That famous port had been built in the 1560s in a natural harbour on the north of the island to act as a depot from whence the Spanish treasure fleet could pick up a large naval escort. The few intrepid travellers who penetrated into the interior would have observed that the fauna of Cuba was friendly: there were no snakes, few big reptiles and no large wild animals. The indigenous Indian population – Tainos or Ciboneys – was held to have been absorbed or had died out, though in the unfrequented East of the island a few Taino villages survived. Some ‘white’ Spanish (or *criollo*) families had some Indian blood – including the Havana grandees, the Recios de Oquendo family.

About half the Cuban population of 150,000 or so lived in the city of Havana, where malaria and yellow fever frequently raged. Most of the rest lived in a few other towns, such as Santiago de Cuba, the seat of an archbishop, Puerto Príncipe, which boasted a bishopric, Sancti Spiritus, Trinidad, Matanzas and Mariel. None of these reached 10,000 in population. Rising above these cities, or near them, were a number of sixteenth-century castles and churches. In Havana three fortresses – la Fuerza, el Morro and la Punta – had all been built to guard the port. Communications were mostly, as elsewhere in the Spanish Americas, by sea. There were few roads. The only substantial employer was the royal dockyard at Havana under the Spanish captain-general and, in order to guarantee to him a ready supply of tropical hardwoods, the felling of all such hardwood trees in the island was supposed to be controlled.

There was little industry in Cuba besides ship repairing, the curing of pork, the salting of beef and the tanning of leather, all of which was done

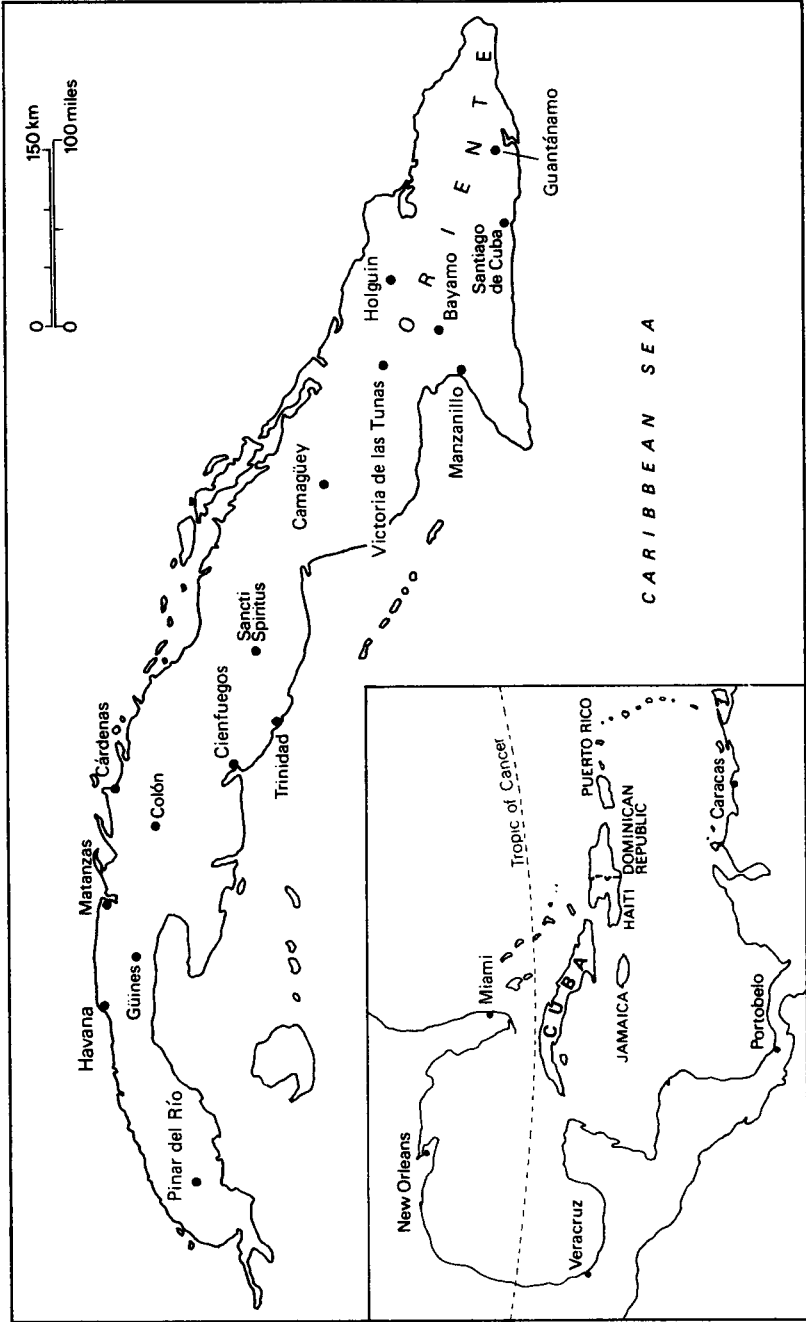
for the benefit of the convoys from Veracruz and Portobelo. There had once in the sixteenth century been a little gold in Cuban rivers, but what there was had been recovered long ago. In Cuba in 1750 there were about a hundred small sugar plantations, mostly close to Havana: the cost of carrying sugar to any other port was prohibitive. They were customarily powered by a handful of oxen. They probably produced about 5,000 tons of sugar a year of which only a tenth was officially exported. In comparison, the territorially much smaller French and English sugar colonies, such as Saint-Domingue or Jamaica, had about six hundred larger plantations which could produce 250 tons of sugar each.

This backwardness in Cuba derived partly from the fact that the island had few rivers suitable to power water mills which were responsible for the wealth of other colonies in the Caribbean. It was partly also because there was no large-scale home market in Spain for such a luxury as sugar.

Tobacco was Cuba's most profitable crop. Much of it was made into snuff, though tobacco planters had already established their *vegas* in the valley of the River Cuyaguaje in West Cuba and begun to plant there the tobacco which later made a 'Havana cigar' the jewel of the smoking world. Not till after 1770 were there any cigar factories in Cuba: cigars were for generations rolled on the spot by the pickers of the tobacco, or the leaf was sent back to Spain to Seville for *cigarros*. Tobacco farms were small in size, as were those which concentrated on bee-keeping for beeswax – another modest export. A few ranches in the savannah of central Cuba produced leather and beef; indeed, prior to the development of snuff, cattle-breeding and the production of hides had been Cuba's main export.

The native Indians of the sixteenth century also passed on to the Spaniards the art of cultivating sweet potato, yam, yucca, pumpkin, maize and various beans, though the colonists avoided vegetables and preferred to import almost everything which they had to eat: bread, for instance, was as a rule made from imported wheat. Wine, too, was imported not made. Fish was not much enjoyed. Coffee had begun to be grown in the French West Indies, but none had yet been introduced into Cuba – or for that matter into any Spanish colony.

Political control of Cuba lay with the captain-general, who himself ultimately depended on the viceroy in Mexico. But Mexico was several weeks away, Spain at least six weeks. The captain-general in Havana also had to share responsibility *de facto* with the commander of the treasure fleet while the latter was in Havana for about six weeks a year. The



Cuba

captain-general was the father of a small bureaucracy of officials who had been appointed to their posts by the home administrators in Seville. Most of these, like the captain-general himself, were badly paid. All hoped for profit from graft out of their official posts. Treasurers, accountants, judges, naval commissars and port officials of every kind came as poor *peninsulares* to the Spanish empire, as did bishops and priests, and expected one day to return rich to Andalusia or to Castile. But many such persons never in fact returned home and left their families to swell the class of *criollos* who managed the town councils, established prices for most basic commodities, farmed and often eventually became merchants or landowners.

Cuba like the rest of the Spanish empire had by the eighteenth century its own *criollo* aristocracy which consisted of a handful of rich families of whom some – Recio de Oquendo, Herrera, Núñez del Castillo, Calvo de la Puerta and Beltrán de la Cruz – had been in the island for several generations. They would customarily live most of the year in town houses, in Havana (or perhaps Santiago, or Trinidad), visit their plantations or ranches at harvest or times of religious festivals and, as a rule, never visit Spain or any other part of the empire. In this respect they differed from those absentee landlords who enriched themselves in the rest of the Caribbean. These Cuban oligarchs are more to be compared with their cousins on the mainland in this as in other respects.

Three other things distinguished Cuba from many non-Spanish colonies in the Caribbean: the relatively small number of slaves; the relatively large number of free blacks and mulattos; and the importance of urban life. The sugar plantations of the British and French colonies, like those of Portuguese Brazil, had demanded vast numbers of slaves. The smaller number of small-sized Cuban plantations needed fewer. In 1750, there were probably more slaves in Havana in private houses, shipyards or on cattle ranches than there were on sugar plantations. Freed negroes constituted almost a third of the black or mulatto population of the city of Havana. This high proportion was partly the consequence of explicit laws making the purchase of liberty by slaves easier than in, say, British colonies. Partly it derived from the presence of a ruling class willing to emancipate slaves on their death bed – and specially willing to emancipate their bastards. The social and political structure of the island of Cuba, like that of the rest of the Spanish empire, had led to the creation of cities. The English colonies in the Caribbean had scarcely any urban life and that went for English North America as well.

c. 1750–c. 1860

5

During the second half of the eighteenth century Cuba was transformed into a prosperous sugar colony. These were the four main causes: first, the creation of a new market for sugar at home in Spain and elsewhere – including the newly independent United States of America; secondly the emergence of a class of landlords interested in developing their land and promoting wealth, rather than in preserving status; thirdly, the import of slaves from Africa to Cuba on a far larger scale than before; and finally a series of far-reaching economic reforms introduced by the enlightened ministers of King Charles III, not least the lifting of many of the old bureaucratic restraints on trade. The gradual decline of other islands in the Caribbean as sugar producers also contributed to Cuba's prosperity. More and more investors from outside the Spanish empire put money into Cuba to the benefit both of themselves and of the island, and the colony was quick to introduce new technology in the sugar industry.

The event around which these developments revolved was the British occupation of Havana in 1762. We should not fear to designate turning points in history, if the events really justify it – as these do. The victory of Lord Albemarle's expedition to west Cuba was, of course, first and foremost the conclusion of a victorious war for Britain. Havana had never fallen before to foreign invaders. The British victory was the signal for an immediate descent on the island by merchants of all sorts from all parts of the British Empire – sellers of grain, horses, cloth and woollen goods, iron-ware and minor industrial equipment, sugar equipment and slaves. Before 1762, the Cuban market had been formally closed to foreigners, although much smuggling had occurred.

The chief consequence of Albemarle's victory was that, during the year when the English directed the affairs of Havana, about 4,000 slaves were sold there. This figure was perhaps equivalent to one-eighth of the number of slaves in the island at that time. Earlier applications under Spain to expand the import of slaves had been rejected by the government in Havana on the ground that it would be politically risky to have so many new slaves (*bozales*) in the island. Such fears were now shown to be over-cautious. No great slave revolt followed the sudden increase. When the British left the island after the peace of Paris (1763), slave factors and mercantile relationships with the British islands remained. During the eighteen years following 1763, the number of ships calling per year in Cuba rose from 6 to 200. In particular, there was a steady increase in imports of slaves into Cuba, many of them re-exported from Jamaica.

Slave monopolies granted to particular companies lasted another generation but were evaded. British and North American dealers were a permanent feature in the Cuban market, and after 1775 Spanish merchants began to go to Africa to bring back slaves to Havana – many of them being re-sold elsewhere in the empire. In 1778 the Spanish purchased Fernando Po and Annobon from Portugal. In 1789, the Spanish Government permitted merchants to bring into the empire as many slaves as they liked – the only regulation being that a third of each shipload had to be women.

Another immediate consequence of the British conquest was the disappearance of most old Spanish taxes – *almojarifazgos* (payable on all goods coming in from Spain); *averia* (payable to the navy); *alcabalas* (payable on all exports to Spain); and *donativos* (extra levies paid on demand to help the government in Madrid). Some of these, it is true, were temporarily restored after the British left. But most restrictions on trade were abolished for good. In 1765, the right of Spaniards to trade in the Caribbean was extended to other ports than Cadiz – seven, to begin with – but that really meant that anyone in Spain who wanted to trade with Cuba could do so, for the ports included Barcelona, Malaga, Alicante, Corunna and Santander – a broad spectrum. Commercial activity within the Spanish empire was free by the time of the War of American Independence. In 1771 the unstable local copper coinage, the *macuquina*, was replaced by the *peso fuerte*. In 1776 Havana became a free port. Further, the regulation of commerce within the Spanish empire, in Cuba as in Venezuela, ceased to be the business of the local town council. The interest of the crown was secured, in the empire as in Spain, by a general financial commissioner, *intendente*, whose effectiveness was considerable. He enabled the Spanish crown to gain more income from fairer taxes – an ideal fiscal achievement. In the 1790s duties on the import of machinery for the production of sugar or coffee were similarly abandoned. Foreign merchants were not only permitted to enter and to settle in the island but were allowed to buy property; so both British and United States merchants were soon to be found well-established there.

Francisco de Arango, a planter and lawyer who had fought in the courts of Madrid, successfully, against the suggestion that the last slave monopoly (granted to the English firm of Baker and Dawson) should be renewed, travelled to England with his fellow sugar planter and distant relation, the conde de Casa Montalvo, to see how the merchants in Liverpool and London ran their slave trade and how English manufac-

c. 1750–c. 1860

7

turers worked their factories. On their return to Cuba in 1792 they founded the *Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País*, in Havana, on the model of similar societies elsewhere in Spain and the Spanish empire. That body inspired governmental enquiries and the gathering of both statistics and economic information, and it also led indirectly to the foundation of Cuba's first rudimentary newspaper, *El Papel Periódico*, a daily newsheet from 1793.

Arango and his generation were pioneers of every kind of innovation. They created a public library, built hospitals, a lunatic asylum and free schools (for white children only). In England, Arango had looked at, and been impressed by, a steam engine. One was taken to Cuba in 1794 by the Reinhold firm to be used experimentally in 1797 at the conde de Casa Montalvo's son-in-law's plantation, at Seybabo. Water mills were also used successfully for the first time in west Cuba after French planters and technicians fleeing from the Haitian Revolution had brought to Cuba the idea of the overshot water wheel. Another innovation of the 1790s was a dumb turner which took the place of slaves introducing the cane into the wheel of the mill. A new sugar cane was introduced too in the 1790s – the strong South Sea 'otahaite' strain, while – probably equally important – mangoes were brought to supplement the meagre fruit diet by an English merchant, Philip Allwood, the powerful and controversial representative in Havana of the big Liverpool firm of slave merchants, Baker and Dawson.

By the turn of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, therefore, Cuba was plainly a very promising part of the Spanish empire, bidding fair, with its plantations spreading far away from Havana, to overtake Jamaica as the biggest producer of sugar in the Caribbean. Spain gave every fiscal encouragement both to those producing and exporting sugar and to those seeking an adequate slave labour force. The export of sugar from Cuba by 1800 already exceeded that of hides, tobacco, cane brandy, wax, coffee and nuts which also came into Spain in ships from Havana. Thus, in the 1770s, Cuba was exporting over 10,000 tons of sugar a year and in the 1790s, just before the outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars, over 30,000 tons. The number of plantations growing sugar increased from about 100 to about 500, and the land planted to sugar cane had increased from 10,000 acres to nearly 200,000. The average size of a sugar plantation in 1762 in Cuba was probably no more than 300 acres; by the 1790s, it was nearly 700. Whereas many old sugar plantations had employed barely a dozen slaves, many new ones of the 1790s employed 100.

As in all progress which involves an increase in the scale of operations, there was an element of suffering. Bigger plantations meant more remote landlords. Mulattos or freed slaves ceased to own sugar mills – as they had occasionally done before 1760. More slaves meant bigger dwelling places, barracks taking the place of huts, and hence fewer private plots on which a slave in the early eighteenth century might have kept a chicken or planted cassava for bread. Small mills vanished, or ceased to make real sugar, producing instead only *raspadura* or rough sugar for consumption by the slaves themselves. Fewer and fewer sugar plantations remained self-sufficient, able to grow maize and vegetables, as well as sugar, burning their own wood or eating their own cattle. Few plantations too troubled about carrying out the Church's regulations that all slaves should be instructed in Christianity. New sugar mills increasingly had lay rather than religious names. Priests turned a blind eye to work on Sundays, and slaves were often buried in unconsecrated ground. Even so, monasteries and even the seminary of Havana in the 1790s had their sugar mills.

Another element had by now also entered Cuban history – and one which has since never been wholly absent: namely, the world sugar market, that is to say, the interests of rich consumers of sugar in other countries. 'I know not why we should blush to confess it', wrote John Adams, 'but molasses was an essential ingredient in American independence'. For two generations before 1775, Massachusetts had drunk, and profited from selling, the best 'Antilles rum'. Jamaica could no longer satisfy the needs of the rum merchants of Massachusetts, since its production was falling, with its soil exhausted. Farmers and planters alike in that era were ignorant of the benefits of fertilizer. North American merchants desired, therefore, to trade with both French and Spanish sugar colonies before the war of independence. British regulations prevented them from doing so. Symbolic of the importance of the Cuban trade in North American eyes was the nomination as first United States commercial representative in Cuba of Robert Smith, the representative in Havana of Robert Morris, the financier of the American Revolution. Most of the increase of sugar production in Cuba was soon being sold in the United States.

The revolution in Haiti (Saint-Domingue) had, if anything, an even greater consequence for Cuba than did the American Revolution. The slave revolt first of all increased the demand for Cuban sugar in such a way as greatly to please Arango and his colleagues. Sugar prices rose so as

to increase the tendency, anyway great, of Cuban landowners to turn over their land to sugar cane. But the revolution in Haiti also caused tremors of fear to run through all the plantations of Cuba. Haiti might be ruined commercially after 1791, and that might benefit Cuba economically. But the danger was that the ruin might spread – or be spread. After all, several of the revolutionaries in Saint-Domingue had been Jamaican or had come from elsewhere in the West Indies.

In the event, it was the French planters – those who could do so – who fled from Haiti to Cuba and elsewhere in the still safe Caribbean. And they brought not only terrible stories of murder and revolution but also many useful techniques, to add to those already recently put into use, for the cultivation and processing of sugar. The most important were, first, the so-called ‘Jamaican train’, by which a long train of copper cauldrons could be heated over a single fire at the same time and at the same temperature and, secondly, the overshot water-wheels which have already been mentioned. Sugar technicians who had worked in Haiti, many born in France, were soon found on the bigger Cuban plantations.

International connections, however, spelled international troubles as well as wealth. The Napoleonic wars not only interrupted trade and delayed the introduction of steam engines for the mills of Cuba on any large scale but also gave the planters an experience of wild fluctuations in sugar prices. In 1807, two-thirds of the sugar harvest went unsold because of a sudden United States suppression of trade with all belligerents. In 1808, the collapse of the Spanish crown before Napoleon left the captain-general, the marqués de Someruelos, with virtually full power in Cuba. The island was in an exposed strategic position. That in turn caused President Jefferson to make the first of many United States bids to protect the island: the United States, he said, would prefer Cuba – and Mexico – to remain Spanish but, should Spain not be able to maintain it herself, the United States would be willing to buy the island. The offer was turned down, but Jefferson continued to toy with the idea while the *cabildo* in Havana, led by Francisco de Arango’s cousin, José de Arango, made some moves to suggest annexation to the United States in the face of what some members took to be dangerously liberal tendencies in Spain itself, especially with respect to the abolition of slavery.

The Napoleonic wars were, of course, the midwife of Latin American independence. Cut off from the *madre patria* by the destruction of the Spanish fleet at Trafalgar, enriched by the last thirty years of the Bourbon economic reformation, and politically stimulated by the American, as

well as the French, revolutions, *criollos* in South America everywhere began to contemplate political autonomy, even formal independence from Spain. Such ideas, blending with or transforming revolutionary ideas from Haiti, naturally reached Cuba also: a freemason, Ramón de la Luz, organized one of those romantic and ineffective conspiracies which characterized the novels of Stendhal or the history of the Risorgimento in Italy in order to achieve Cuban independence in 1809. These ideas did not prosper, however, for a simple reason: the spectre of Haiti. No sane Cuban planter was ready to risk a serious quarrel with Spain and the Spanish garrison if there were the remotest danger of the opportunity being exploited by leaders of a successful slave revolt. Hence the *junta superior* of Havana rejected the invitation of the *cabildo* of Caracas to take part in the wars of independence. Some physical impediments also restrained Cubans. Cuba was an island and the loyalty to Spain of its cities could easily be maintained by only a few ships of the fleet – should one ever be assembled. Then many royalist refugees fled or emigrated to Cuba from various parts of the Spanish empire on the mainland – strengthening Cuba's reputation as the 'ever faithful island'. Finally, the priests in Cuba, unlike those on the mainland, were mostly Spanish-born, and had no ambition to echo the exploits of the fathers Hidalgo and Morelos in Mexico. Still, it was probably the fear of 'a new Haiti' that most restrained the Cubans: an anxiety given weight by the discovery of another romantic conspiracy – this time led by José Antonio Aponte, a negro carpenter, who planned to burn cane and coffee fields, who apparently made contact with co-religionaries in Haiti and who invoked the African god Changó to help him. A later conspiracy, the *Soles y Rayos de Bolívar* headed by José Francisco Lemus in the 1820s, was much more formidable but, like Aponte's, was also betrayed in the end.

At the same time the Cuban planters were concerned at the threat posed by the British campaign to abolish the slave trade internationally, following the ban on the trade to and from British ports (introduced in 1808). Francisco Arango and others had spoken forcefully against any concessions on this front whilst in Spain in 1812 and 1813, and the first Spanish government after the restoration of Ferdinand VII in 1814 at first resisted British demands. But in 1817 the British were successful in persuading Spain formally to follow their example, and in 1820 Spain legally abolished the slave trade in return for £400,000, to be paid as compensation to slave merchants. Spain also accepted the right of the Royal Navy to stop slave ships and to bring suspected slavers for trial