

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00796-2 - The West Indies: Their Social and Religious Condition

Edward Bean Underhill

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## CHAPTER I.

The Voyage—Our Fellow-passengers—St. Kitts—Martinique—St. Lucia—  
Barbadoes—St. Vincent's—Grenada—The Gulf of Paria—Port of Spain.

A VOYAGE across the Atlantic to the isles of the West, in the summer season, in one of the splendidly-fitted steamers of the Royal Mail Company, does not afford many incidents. Fine or stormy, as the weather may perchance be, the noble vessel, alike unheeding tempest or calm, presses on its way; nor does its heart of steam cease for a moment to beat, till the voyagers gaze on the pleasant-looking city of St. Thomas's Isle, and are moored in its land-locked and unhealthy harbour. On the fifth day from Southampton, a brief glimpse was afforded us of the Isle of Terceira, one of the Azores, as towards sunset we hastened by. We passed on the south side of the island. St. George's Isle was also in

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sight; and dimly on the horizon we caught a glimpse of the cone of Pico, some sixty miles off. The sunset was glorious: it lit up the hills and dales of Terceira with an exquisite purple light, which gradually faded away into the grey haze of twilight. Then came the moon to give another charm to the fretful wave, to the ripple of the more distant sea, and to the shadowy regions of the land, as we hurried on our way.

To most passengers, the objects of interest afforded by the sea are soon exhausted. The sparkling, frightened flight of the flying-fish attracts notice for a little while; schools of porpoises, in slow rolling motion on the surface of the waves, soon tire the spectator; and the more that they allow no questions, no examinations of their attainments in fish or other lore. The seaweed of the wonderful gulf stream has a share of attention, and gives rise to much scientific and other talk on the origin and course of this great river of the sea, and its climatic influence on the lands whose shores it laves. At length interest fastens on our fellow-passengers, and the coolness of the first few days wears away. Travelling experiences are recounted, thoughts on many things are exchanged, and in a while matters of personal concern are more or less confidentially imparted. Little by little free intercourse is established, and the party on board settles down into well-understood combinations, on terms of easy familiarity.

Our fellow-voyagers were of a mingled sort: some were Spaniards, on their way to Cuba; others were Mexicans, returning to their homes after an European

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tour, or from a visit to the marts of the Old World. One gentleman was an employé of the Mexican Government, having fulfilled a diplomatic trust in Spain. With great earnestness he assured us that the journey from Vera Cruz to the capital of Mexico was a dangerous one: he should most certainly be robbed on the way, and perhaps murdered. A few members of the party seemed to think that the possession of Mexico by the Government of the United States was an arrangement devoutly to be wished, even at the cost of its separate national existence. Anything would be better than the present chronic anarchy, and the absence of security for person and property, which for so many years have been the condition of this fine portion of the globe.

There was, however, more interest for us in the opinions of some on board connected with the West India sugar islands, and whose personal acquaintance with the places and people we were about to visit, enabled them to communicate facts which might be useful in guiding our judgment or our plans. Several gentlemen of official rank were passengers; and we listened with pleasure to their statements on the general condition of the islands, and the results of emancipation. Not one desired the return of slavery. Jamaica excepted, all the English islands were said to be prospering, some more so than at any former period of their history. Especially was this the case with St. Kitts.

St. Kitts, or rather St. Christophers, contains about 21,000 inhabitants. There are not labourers sufficient

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for the cultivation of the island, and much competition exists among the planters for their services. They are therefore well paid, and enjoy many immunities. The money rate of wages is kept pretty uniform; but the planters offer inducements in the way of provision grounds, better houses, liberty to graze goats and cattle on the estate's lands, to secure the labourers' toil. The people not immediately engaged in the cultivation of the estates, hold their houses and land at low rents; a few of them are owners of the property they occupy. The deficiency of labour leads to a somewhat untidy cultivation; and in this respect the island does not compare with Barbadoes, where population is abundant, and the rate of wages low; but the produce of the island is large and increasing. Last year 9600 hogsheads of sugar were exported, the largest export for fifty-one years, of which our informant himself shipped one-tenth. The planters do not make the large profits of slavery times; but the people, *i. e.* the emancipated negroes, are far better off, are rising socially, and enjoy many privileges. They are contented; and if individuals among the whites have suffered, the community, as a whole, in every moral and social respect, has been a great gainer by emancipation. The people are well housed, well dressed, but not provident. There are, however, no paupers. The sick and those unable to work are provided for in hospitals, supported from Government funds. Work is abundant. Idleness or crime alone prevents a man from obtaining a good subsistence.

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Schools are supported by grants in aid, from funds raised by taxation on provision grounds. Each school so assisted must have, at least, fifty scholars in regular attendance. All children under twelve years of age are, by law, under the charge of the medical officer appointed to each parish, who is salaried by the Government. His sanitary powers are very considerable. The population thus loses but a small proportion of its children; additions are made by natural increase to the labouring class, and the foundation is wisely laid for a sufficiency of labour as cultivation extends, apart from the costly immigration schemes of other islands.\*

The island is broken up into nine parishes, and a church has been erected in each parish; but there is not a sufficient supply of clergymen for them all. The Moravian and Wesleyan missions are flourishing. A striking illustration of the impressibility of the negro character is seen in the effects of the religious teaching of these two bodies. The Moravian negro is quiet, easily satisfied, and seldom displays any anxiety to better his condition. He avoids lawsuits, and is patient under wrong. The Wesleyan negro is more active, fond of show, somewhat given to self-assertion, more independent, and anxious to secure his legal rights. In a similar way, national characteristics are impressed on the negro: the English negro is easily

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\* The natural increase of population is not, however, sufficiently large to meet the growing demands of capital, and the extension of cultivation. Since my return to Europe, the legislature of St. Kitts has determined to resort to immigration.

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distinguished from a French or Spanish negro, and these from each other, according to the influences under which they live.

The Government pays much attention to the general welfare of the coloured population. Taxation is thrown as much as possible on articles of import or export, and so arranged as rather to stimulate industry, and check extravagance, than to burden any particular class. The prejudice of colour is not unknown; but it is stronger between the various shades of brown and black, than between the black and the white. The following is an illustration. A black man was chosen a member of the Assembly. Several brown men were already members. They threatened to resign their seats if a black man was permitted to share their deliberations. The Government insisted on the black man's right, and, after much wordy war, the objectors were obliged to submit. The chief barrier to equal social intercourse with the whites, is stated to lie in tastes and habits still tinged with the vices of slavery, and the ill-educated condition of the black population. Conscious of inferiority in these respects, they shrink from the society of white people, and are uneasy in their company.

Crime is not prevalent, and what there is consists chiefly of petty thefts, larcenies, and personal abuse. In abundant seasons, every kind of crime diminishes. The number of offences rises or falls with the diminution or increase of employment. The magistrates depend much on the influence of the missionaries to

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restrain excesses, and to preserve the people within the bounds of law.

No small portion of this favourable picture of the working of emancipation in St. Kitts, is doubtless owing to the residence on the island of many of the proprietors of the estates, and the wisdom which of late years has characterised the measures of its Government. But very different views were expressed by others of our fellow-passengers. Thus it was said, that the Act of 1838 was, with a great want of wisdom, carried into hasty execution. Time ought to have been allowed for preparation. The change was too sudden, and was inevitably followed by the ruin of Jamaica, Grenada, St. Vincent's, and the rest of the English Antilles. The slave, as the result has shown, was unfit for freedom. He should have been placed under salutary restraint for a long term of years, during which education should have been imparted, and habits of industry and self-restraint acquired. The fanatical zeal of philanthropists and missionaries defeated every measure of this kind. Hence in Jamaica, and Trinidad, and Guiana, the enfranchised slave hastened to the woods, and squatted on unoccupied lands; and, although an improvement may now manifest itself in some places, yet, as a race, the negroes are improvident, idle, and not accessible to the usual motives which procure in more favoured lands regular and skilful labour for the capitalist. More than once, *Baptist* missionaries were said to have been the chief obstacle



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to a sound and fair settlement of those economical questions which emancipation raised for solution.

To such statements it was only permitted us to listen, to inquire, to compare, withholding for the present a definite judgment. The following pages will, in due course, give to our readers the final conclusions to which we came.

Few voyages are more beautiful than the run from St. Thomas' to Trinidad. The mail packet touches at the larger islands, and passes within sight of nearly all the rest. Martinique, the southern end of St. Lucia, and St. Vincent's, surpass all others in grandeur, wild picturesque beauty, and impressive mountain scenery. It was at sunrise that we approached Martinique. Mountains, hills, valleys, ravines, gorges, precipices, in infinite variety of form, presented, as we steamed along, a panorama of surpassing beauty. Everywhere were the signs of cultivation. The slopes of the hills, and the dales, were covered with plantations. Here and there, a "sucrerie" peeped out from the abundant foliage of mango-trees, or was surrounded by groves of cocoa nut palms bending in manifold graceful forms. The mountain tops were covered with forests; the whole glowing with light and varied colour, as the sun ascended to the zenith. The bustle of the port, and the numerous ships lying in the roadstead, proved the existence of a considerable trade. It is understood that the colony has surmounted the depression that followed emancipation, which boon was granted by the

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revolutionary government of France, in 1848 ; but it is difficult to obtain any accurate reports of the progress of the French colonies. The freedom enjoyed is not that absolute liberty secured to the negro in British possessions ; but is said to be a species of serfdom, which compels labour, and leaves to the enfranchised little choice as to the kind or place of toil. As we coasted along, the scenery became more quiet, but was still most charming. In some places were immense dykes, like walls of masonry, enclosing gloomy ravines. In others, the swelling hills were brilliantly green with growing cane crops. Beyond, mountains towered to the clouds and hid their heads in mist, while their slopes towards the sea, presented to the voyager the pleasant sight of fields under culture with tropical productions. At the southern end, the land becomes flat and uninteresting.

A short run, and we were in sight of St. Lucia. This is an English island. On the northern side, the side of our approach, the hills are covered with bush, or forest, presenting but few signs of cultivation. About the port of Castries, the mountains put on a bolder form. Lofty eminences are seen to the southward ; most conspicuously, the two peaks called Pitou, or Les Aiguilles. They are conical in form, and, with other contiguous elevations, exhibit unmistakeable marks of volcanic origin. Hot springs even now testify of the fires that slumber beneath. As the chief cultivation is on the north side of the island, it was not visible to us, our course lying to the west.