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978-1-108-02322-1 - An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo

Bryan Edwards

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An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo

Bryan Edwards (1743–1800) was a wealthy West Indian planter, politician and historian. He vigorously opposed the abolition of the slave trade, since the sugar industry relied heavily on it. *An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the island of St. Domingo* was published in 1797. St Domingo (now Haiti) had been one of the most prosperous West Indian economies, producing more sugar and coffee than all the British West Indies combined. The harsh treatment of the slaves under the French *code noir* led to a widespread revolt in 1791, in part inspired by the French Revolution. An alliance between white planters and the British to take over the island was unsuccessful. Edwards feared that the revolt would spread to other islands, destroying their trade. The rebellion in St Domingo was of major significance, as it led to the colony becoming the first independent black-ruled republic in 1804.

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BRYAN EDWARDS



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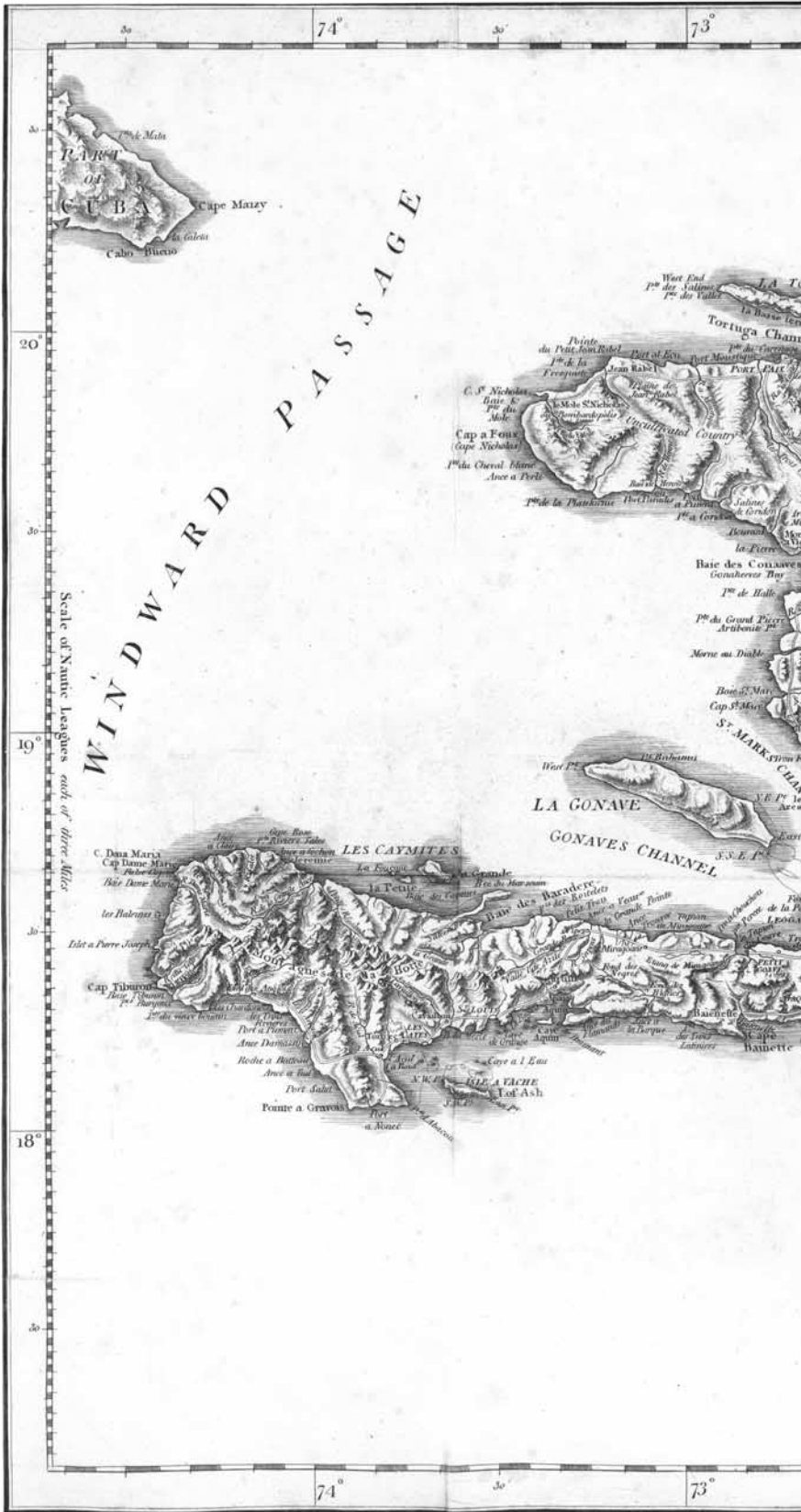
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AN
HISTORICAL SURVEY
OF THE
FRENCH COLONY
IN THE
ISLAND OF ST. DOMINGO:

COMPREHENDING

A SHORT ACCOUNT OF ITS ANCIENT GOVERNMENT,
POLITICAL STATE, POPULATION,
PRODUCTIONS, AND EXPORTS;

A NARRATIVE OF THE CALAMITIES WHICH HAVE DESOLATED
THE COUNTRY EVER SINCE THE YEAR 1789,

*WITH SOME REFLECTIONS ON THEIR CAUSES AND
PROBABLE CONSEQUENCES;*

AND

A DETAIL OF THE MILITARY TRANSACTIONS
OF THE BRITISH ARMY IN THAT ISLAND TO THE END OF 1794.

BY *BRYAN EDWARDS*, Esq. M.P. F.R.S. &c.
AUTHOR OF THE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH COLONIES IN THE WEST INDIES.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR JOHN STOCKDALE, PICCADILLY.

1797.

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P R E F A C E.

SOON after I had published the History of the British Colonies in the West Indies, I conceived the design of compiling a general account of the settlements made by all the nations of Europe in that part of the New Hemisphere, but more particularly the French, whose possessions were undoubtedly the most valuable and productive of the whole Archipelago. This idea suggested itself to my mind, on surveying the materials I had collected with regard to their principal colony in St. Domingo; not doubting, as the fortune of war had placed under the British dominion all or most of the other French islands, that I should easily procure such particulars of the condition, population, and culture of each, as would enable me to complete my design, with credit to myself, and satisfaction to the Publick. I am sorry to observe, that in this expectation I

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have

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have hitherto found myself disappointed. The present publication therefore, is confined wholly to St. Domingo; concerning which, having personally visited that unhappy country soon after the revolt of the negroes in 1791, and formed connexions there, which have supplied me with regular communications ever since, I possess a mass of evidence, and important documents. My motives for going thither, are of little consequence to the Publick; but the circumstances which occasioned the voyage, the reception I met with, and the situation in which I found the wretched Inhabitants, cannot fail of being interesting to the reader; and I flatter myself that a short account of those particulars, while it confers some degree of authenticity on my labours, will not be thought an improper Introduction to my book.

In the month of September 1791, when I was at Spanish Town in Jamaica, two French Gentlemen were introduced to me, who were just arrived from St. Domingo, with information that the negro slaves belonging to the French part of that island, to the number, as was believed, of 100,000 and upwards, had

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had revolted, and were spreading death and desolation over the whole of the northern province. They reported that the governor-general, considering the situation of the colony as a common cause among the white inhabitants of all nations in the West Indies, had dispatched commissioners to the neighbouring islands, as well as to the States of North America, to request immediate assistance of troops, arms, ammunition, and provisions; and that themselves were deputed on the same errand to the Government at Jamaica: I was accordingly desired to present them to the Earl of Effingham, the commander in chief. Although the dispatches with which these gentlemen were furnished, were certainly a very sufficient introduction to his lordship, I did not hesitate to comply with their request; and it is scarcely necessary to observe, that the liberal and enlarged mind which animated every part of Lord Effingham's conduct, needed no sollicitation, in a case of beneficence and humanity. Superior to national prejudice, he felt, as a man and a christian ought to feel, for the calamities of *fellow men*; and he saw, in its full extent, the danger to which every island in the West Indies would be exposed from such an

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example,

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example, if the triumph of savage anarchy over all order and government should be complete. He therefore, without hesitation, assured the commissioners that they might depend on receiving from the government of Jamaica, every assistance and succour which it was in his power to give. Troops he could not offer, for he had them not; but he said he would furnish arms, ammunition, and provisions, and he promised to consult with the distinguished Officer commanding in the naval department, concerning the propriety of sending up one or more of his Majesty's ships; the commissioners having suggested that the appearance in their harbours of a few vessels of war might serve to intimidate the insurgents, and keep them at a distance, while the necessary defences and intrenchments were making, to preserve the city of Cape François from an attack.

ADMIRAL AFFLECK (as from his known worth, and general character might have been expected) very cheerfully co-operated on this occasion with Lord Effingham; and immediately issued orders to the captains of the Blonde and Daphne frigates to proceed,

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ceed, in company with a sloop of war, forthwith to Cape François. The Centurion was soon afterwards ordered to Port au Prince. The Blonde being commanded by my amiable and lamented friend Captain William Affleck, who kindly undertook to convey the French commissioners back to St. Domingo, I was easily persuaded to accompany them thither; and some other gentlemen of Jamaica joined the party.

WE arrived in the harbour of Cape François in the evening of the 26th of September, and the first object which arrested our attention as we approached, was a dreadful scene of devastation by fire. The noble plain adjoining the Cape was covered with ashes, and the surrounding hills, as far as the eye could reach, every where presented to us ruins still smoking, and houses and plantations at that moment in flames. It was a sight more terrible than the mind of any man, unaccustomed to such a scene, can easily conceive.—The inhabitants of the town being assembled on the beach, directed all their attention towards us, and we landed amidst a crowd of spectators who, with uplifted hands and streaming eyes, gave welcome to their deliverers (for such they considered us) and acclamations of *vivent les Anglois* resounded from every quarter.

THE

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THE governor of St. Domingo, at that time, was the unfortunate General Blanchelande; a *marechal de camp* in the French service, who has since perished on the scaffold. He did us the honour to receive us on the quay. A committee of the colonial assembly, accompanied by the governor's only son, an amiable and accomplished youth *, had before attended us on board the Blonde, and we were immediately conducted to the place of their meeting. The scene was striking and solemn. The hall was splendidly illuminated, and all the members appeared in mourning. Chairs were placed for us within the bar, and the Governor having taken his seat on the right hand of the President, the latter addressed us in an eloquent and affecting oration, of which the following is as literal a translation as the idiom of the two languages will admit :

“ WE were not mistaken, Gentlemen, when we placed our confidence in your generosity; but we could hardly entertain the hope, that, besides sending us

* This young gentleman likewise perished by the guillotine under the tyranny of Robespierre. He was massacred at Paris, on the 20th July 1794, in the twentieth year of his age.

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succours, you would come in person to give us consolation. You have quitted, without reluctance, the peaceful enjoyment of happiness at home, to come and participate in the misfortunes of strangers, and blend your tears with our's. Scenes of misery (the contemplation of which, to those who are unaccustomed to misfortune, is commonly disgusting) have not suppressed *your* feelings. You have been willing to ascertain the full extent of our distresses, and to pour into our wounds the salutary balm of your sensibility and compassion.

“ THE picture which has been drawn of our calamities, you will find has fallen short of the reality. That verdure with which our fields were lately arrayed, is no longer visible; discoloured by the flames, and laid waste by the devastations of war, our coasts exhibit no prospect but that of desolation. The emblems which we wear on our persons, are the tokens of our grief for the loss of our brethren, who
were

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were surpris'd, and cruelly affaffinated,
by the revolters.

“ IT is by the glare of the conflagra-
tions that every way furround us, that we
now deliberate; we are compelled to fit
armed and watchful through the night,
to keep the enemy from our sanctuary.
For a long time past our bosoms have
been depressed by sorrow; they experience
this day, for the first time, the sweet
emotions of pleasure, in beholding you
amongst us.

“ GENEROUS islanders! humanity has
operated powerfully on your hearts;—you
have yielded to the first emotion of your
generosity, in the hopes of snatching us
from death; for it is already too late to
save us from misery. What a contrast
between *your* conduct, and that of other
nations! We will avail ourselves of your
benevolence; but the days you preserve
to us, will not be sufficient to manifest
our

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our gratitude: our children shall keep it in remembrance.

“ REGENERATED France, unapprized that such calamities might befall us, has taken no measures to protect us against their effects: with what admiration will she learn, that, without your assistance, we should no longer exist as a dependency to any nation.

“ THE Commissioners deputed by us to the island of Jamaica, have informed us of your exertions to serve us.—Receive the assurance of our attachment and sensibility.

“ THE Governor-general of this island, whose sentiments perfectly accord with our own, participates equally in the joy we feel at your presence, and in our gratitude for the assistance you have brought us.”

AT this juncture, the French colonists in St. Domingo, however they might have been divided in

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political

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political sentiments on former occasions, seemed to be softened, by the sense of common suffering, into perfect unanimity. All descriptions of persons joined in one general outcry against the National Assembly, to whose proceedings were imputed all their disasters. This opinion was indeed so widely disseminated, and so deeply rooted, as to create a very strong disposition in all classes of the whites, to renounce their allegiance to the mother country. The black cockade was universally substituted in place of the tri-coloured one, and very earnest wishes were avowed in all companies, without scruple or restraint, that the British administration would send an armament to conquer the island, or rather to receive its voluntary surrender from the inhabitants. What they wished might happen, they persuaded themselves to believe was actually in contemplation; and this idea soon became so prevalent, as to place the author of this work in an awkward situation. The sanguine disposition observable in the French character, has been noticed by all who have visited them; but in this case their credulity grew to a height that was extravagant and even ridiculous. By the kindness of the Earl of Effingham,

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Effingham, I was favoured with a letter of introduction to the Governor-general; and my reception, both by M. Blanchelande and the colonial assembly, was such as not only to excite the publick attention, but also to induce a very general belief that no common motive had brought me thither. The suggestions of individuals to this purpose, became perplexing and troublesome. Assurances on my part, that I had no views beyond the gratification of curiosity, had no other effect than to call forth commendations on my prudence. It was settled, that I was an agent of the English ministry, sent purposely to sound the inclinations of the Colonists towards the government of Great Britain, preparatory to an invasion of the country by a British armament; and their wishes and inclinations co-operating with this idea, gave rise to many strange applications which were made to me; some of them of so ludicrous a nature, as no powers of face could easily withstand.

THIS circumstance is not recorded from the vain ambition of shewing my own importance. The reader of the following pages will discover its application; and, perhaps, it may induce him to make some

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allowance

allowance for that confident expectation of sure and speedy success, which afterwards led to attempts, by the British arms, against this ill-fated country, with means that must otherwise have been thought at the time,—as in the sequel they have unhappily proved,—altogether inadequate to the object in view.

THE ravages of the rebellion, during the time that I remained at Cape François, extended in all directions. The whole of the plain of the Cape, with the exception of one plantation which adjoined the town, was in ruins; as were likewise the Parish of Limonade, and most of the settlements in the mountains adjacent. The Parish of Limbé was every where on fire; and before my departure, the rebels had obtained possession of the bay and forts at l'Acule, as well as the districts of Fort Dauphin, Dondon, and La Grande Riviere.

DESTRUCTION every where marked their progress, and resistance seemed to be considered by the whites not only as unavailing in the present conjuncture, but as hopeless in future. To fill up the measure
of

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of their calamities, their Spanish neighbours in the same island, with a spirit of bigotry and hatred which is, I believe, without an example in the world, refused to lend any assistance towards suppressing a revolt, in the issue of which common reason should have informed them, that their own preservation was implicated equally with that of the French. They were even accused not only of supplying the rebels with arms and provisions; but also of delivering up to them to be murdered, many unhappy French planters who had fled for refuge to the Spanish territories, and receiving money from the rebels as the price of their blood. Of these latter charges, however, no proof was, I believe, ever produced; and, for the honour of human nature, I am unwilling to believe that they are true.

To myself, the case appeared altogether desperate from the beginning; and many of the most respectable and best informed persons in Cape François (some of them in high stations) assured me, in confidence, that they concurred in this opinion. The merchants and importers of European manufactures, apprehending every hour the destruction of the town,

as

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as much from incendiaries within, as from the rebels without, offered their goods for ready money at half the usual prices; and applications were made to Captain Affleck, by persons of all descriptions, for permission to embark in the Blonde for Jamaica. The interposition of the colonial government obliged him to reject their solicitations; but means were contrived to send on board consignments of money to a great amount; and I know that other conveyances were found, by which effects to a considerable value were exported both to Jamaica, and the states of North America.

UNDER these circumstances, it very naturally occurred to me to direct my enquiries towards the state of the colony previous to the revolt, and collect authentick information on the spot, concerning the primary cause, and subsequent progress, of the widely extended ruin before me. Strongly impressed with the gloomy idea, that the only memorial of this once flourishing colony would soon be found in the records of history, I was desirous that my own country and fellow-colonists, in lamenting its catastrophe, might at the same time profit by so terrible an example.

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example. My means of information were too valuable to be neglected, and I determined to avail myself of them. The Governor-general furnished me with copies of all the papers and details of office that I solicited, with a politeness that augmented the favour. The fate of this unhappy gentleman, two years afterwards, gave me infinite concern. Like his royal master, he was unfortunately called to a station to which his abilities were not competent; and in times when perhaps no abilities would have availed him.

THE President of the colonial assembly, at the time of my arrival, was M. de Caducsh, who some time afterwards took up his residence, and held an important office, in Jamaica. He was a man of very distinguished talents, and withal strongly and sincerely attached to the British government, of which, if it were proper, I could furnish unquestionable proof*. This gentleman drew up, at my request, a short account of the origin and progress of the re-

* He afterwards accompanied General Williamson back to St. Domingo, and was killed (or, as I have heard, basely murdered) in a duel at Port au Prince, by one of his countrymen.

bellion;

bellion ; and after my return to England, favoured me with his correspondence. Many important facts, which are given in this work, are given on his authority.

To M. Delaire, a merchant of consideration in the town of the Cape, who has since removed, I believe, to the state of South Carolina, I was indebted for a similar narrative, drawn up by himself in the English language, of which he is a very competent master. It is brief, but much to the purpose ; displays an intimate knowledge of the concerns of the colony, and traces, with great acuteness, its dif-
ficulties to their source.

BUT the friend from whose superior knowledge I have derived my chief information in all respects, is the gentleman alluded to in the marginal note to p. 112 of the following sheets ; and I sincerely regret, that ill-fortune has so pursued him as to render it improper in this work to express to him, *by name*, the obligations I owe to his kindness. After a narrow escape from the vengeance of those merciless men, Santhonax and Polverel, he was induced to re-
turn

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turn

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turn to St. Domingo, to look after his property ; and, I grieve to say, that he is again fallen into the hands of his enemies. He found means, however, previous to his present confinement, to convey to me many valuable papers; and, among others, a copy of that most curious and important document, the dying deposition or testament of Ogè, mentioned in the fourth chapter, and printed at large among the additional notes and illustrations at the end of my work. Of this paper (the communication of which, in proper time, would have prevented the dreadful scenes that followed) although I had frequently heard, I had long doubted the existence. Its suppression by the persons to whom it was delivered by the wretched sufferer, appeared to be an act of such monstrous and unexampled wickedness, that, until I saw the paper itself, I could not credit the charge. Whether M. Blanchelande was a party concerned in this atrocious proceeding, as my friend asserts, I know not. If he was guilty, he has justly paid the forfeit of his crime; and although, believing him innocent, I mourned over his untimely fate, I scruple not to avow my opinion, that if he had possessed a thousand lives, the loss of them all had not been a sufficient
d atonement,