

Introduction



A Concise History of Jamaica attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the most populous English-speaking nation in the Caribbean, an island that has experienced tumultuous changes from the days of its first inhabitants, the Tainos, up to its present position as an independent nation. By combining political, economic, social and cultural history, this book aims to encompass the main developments in the historical trajectory of Jamaica. This is not an easy task to accomplish in a fair and balanced way because of the sheer amount of racial prejudice and social deprivation combined with highly unequal power structures that have characterised the island's modern history. Many issues connected with Jamaica's past are contentious and rightly so, and this book will not shirk discussion of the difficult issues. As an Englishman who has visited Jamaica for research purposes on numerous occasions and who has experienced daily life in Jamaica as an outsider, my interpretation of Jamaica's historical evolution will undoubtedly have different emphases from approaches that might be taken by an insider, so to speak, but I hope that the book will offer judicious assessments that are not dominated by my British background.

Following the format of other volumes in this series, the chapters are organised to cover different chronological

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periods in sequence over time, but each chapter includes evaluation and analysis as well as narrative sections. The historical periods covered by the first two chapters discuss two discrete eras in Jamaica's history – the long centuries of Taino settlement before Columbus's discovery of the New World and the Spanish settlement of Jamaica that followed. Deciding where to draw the chronological lines for most of the remaining chapters, however, has been a personal choice based on careful consideration about what works well as a coherent period for investigation. The slavery era in Jamaica is the focus of the third and fourth chapters, with the dividing line between them situated in the American revolutionary era. The fourth chapter is extended beyond slave emancipation in the 1830s in order to assess the immediate aftermath of freedom for black Jamaicans. The British imposition of Crown Colony government in 1866, a major turning point in Jamaica's history, is taken as the starting point for Chapter 5, which continues through to the major changes emerging in Jamaica with a labour rebellion in the late 1930s followed by an extended franchise and the birth of modern political parties by the end of the Second World War. Chapter 6 offers a substantive discussion of modern Jamaica from 1945 until the present, a period that juxtaposes positive and negative developments.

Two main groups settled in Jamaica during the medieval centuries – the Ostionoid communities that lived there before c. AD 900 and the Meillacans who followed them from c. AD 900 to AD 1500. The earliest date for pre-colonial settlement in Jamaica is around AD 650. Chapter 1 examines the Taino culture that appeared in Jamaica sometime between the late ninth century and AD

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1200: the exact date of the Taino's arrival in Jamaica is yet to be determined. Many facets of the Taino communities remain mysterious and not a single Taino chief's name has been handed down to posterity. They originally came from Hispaniola via South America, but why they migrated in such numbers over a large distance is unknown. They had an oral culture and the surviving ethnographic evidence about their presence in Jamaica is limited and fragmentary. Nevertheless, Chapter 1 shows that the Taino created a distinctive society in Jamaica, with communities organised under the leadership of a *cacique* (chief) based on hereditary descent. The Taino believed in various gods and spirits and participated in trance-like ceremonies that involved taking a hallucinogenic substance. Skilled at working in stone and wood and sustaining themselves with planted root crops and fishing, there were nearly 100 Taino communities in Jamaica by the era of Columbus. The rock art, pottery, wooden carvings and burial sites associated with the Taino are the focus of continuing archaeological research and excavation, which in the future will augment our limited knowledge of Taino settlement in Jamaica.

The Spanish era in Jamaica is the subject of Chapter 2. Christopher Columbus visited the island twice but it was not until three years after his death, in 1509, that Spain decided to establish a settlement in Jamaica. For the next century and a half, Jamaica was a minor Spanish possession in the New World. Spanish place names appeared on maps of Jamaica, the Roman Catholic Church was established on the island and Spanish governors and institutions ruled the colony. The Tainos were decimated by the Spanish occupation, but only limited numbers of settlers

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of Iberian descent came to Jamaica to replace them as labourers and colonists: far greater numbers of Spanish subjects migrated to Cuba, Hispaniola and the Spanish Main – the collective term for parts of the Spanish Empire in mainland America. Throughout the Spanish period in Jamaica, the population appears never to have exceeded between 1,500 and 2,000 people. Crop cultivation, the absorption of Taino techniques for food preparation and livestock imported from other Spanish Caribbean territories met internal consumption demands, but only a limited external trade was conducted. The Spanish authorities never changed the route of the treasure fleets to include a call at Jamaica and so Spanish shipping and trade in the West Indies remained tied to connections between the Spanish Main and either Hispaniola or Cuba. Many raids were made on Spanish Jamaica in the first half of the seventeenth century. Though many of these attacks had a limited impact, Oliver Cromwell's Western Design – a large military expedition – led to the successful English conquest of the island in 1655 and ended the Spanish era in Jamaica.

After conquering Jamaica, England moved swiftly to establish a permanent presence on the island. English institutions, the English legal system and governors appointed from London all emerged quickly and settlers flocked to Jamaica, intending to make far greater use of the island's potential economic resources than the Spanish had ever attempted. Chapter 3 focuses on this consolidation of English colonisation in Jamaica between the initial conquest under Cromwell and the American War of Independence. Between 1700 and 1775 Jamaica eclipsed Barbados as the most lucrative English possession in the

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Caribbean. The economy of Jamaica was strongly based on the rise of sugar plantations based on imported slave labour from Africa, though Jamaica was a large enough island to develop a broader economy based on livestock rearing, internal markets and the marketing of slaves and produce to Spanish America.

Chapter 3 discusses the main facets of slavery and explains the treatment of Africans by transplanted white British people. Most slaves were imported Africans rather than native-born people because of the high rate of mortality associated with the sugar plantations. Planters preferred to import rather than breed slaves. The work regime on plantations witnessed the introduction of the gang system based on a yearly seasonal round of crop production. Slave resistance is discussed along with the significance of Maroon, or rebel, communities in Jamaica. A white elite held all positions of political and legal power even though it was by far a minority in demographic terms. White planters, merchants, plantation managers and attorneys all wanted to benefit substantially economically from living in Jamaica, with the most successful wanting to retire with their fortunes to Britain. Loyalty to the crown was a hallmark of Jamaica in the era of American independence, as whites on the island were far outnumbered by slaves, whom they feared, and the economic significance of Jamaica was such that it was unthinkable to sacrifice its presence in the British Empire.

Many elements of Jamaican life already in place before the American War of Independence continued thereafter, including the importance of sugar, slavery and British dominance of the island's affairs. But, as Chapter 4 shows, significant changes affected Jamaica in the period

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from the peace treaty of 1783 to the implementation of Crown Colony government in 1866. Planters, who were frequently absentee owners, faced pressure from humanitarian anti-slave trade campaigners from 1788 onwards, when parliament first discussed at length the operation of the slave trade. The eventual success of abolitionists led to the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and then to further troubles for the plantocracy and their associates in the years leading up to slave emancipation in 1834. Amelioration measures improved the state of the slaves in Jamaica to some extent and planters were forced to take more care over the medical care of their labourers. Gradual emancipation was the dominant ideology among abolitionists in the 1820s and early 1830s, but a swing towards immediate emancipation emerged swiftly around the time of the last major Jamaican slave revolt in 1831–2.

Slave emancipation was enacted by the British parliament in 1834. As Chapter 4 shows, this important legislation overwhelmingly favoured the white planter class and elite. Slaveholders received £20 million compensation from the British parliament for the loss of slave labour through emancipation; nothing was offered to the ex-slaves. After a short period of apprenticeship, between 1834 and 1838, during which Jamaican blacks were still tied to the plantations where they resided and compelled to work for their former owners largely without wages, a quarter century of full freedom brought gains for blacks in terms of greater autonomy over their own lives and the ability to earn wages and to cultivate their own land. Social improvements for black Jamaicans and full political rights, however, were not achieved and most Jamaicans were

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excluded from the franchise. The Morant Bay rebellion of 1865 saw the grievances of black Jamaicans surface in demonstrations and violence. The British government responded to this revolt by quelling the outbreak through brutal force and by implementing Crown Colony government in 1866, which eliminated the role of the Assembly in Jamaican political life.

Chapter 5 concentrates on Jamaica's development during the long period of Crown Colony government that dominated the period from 1866 to 1945. Direct rule by the British governor, supported by a Legislative Council from the mid-1880s, was characterised by a benevolent paternalism that presided over administrative and political arrangements intended to preserve social and political power for the white minority. Many ordinary Jamaicans were excluded from the electorate and it was not until the efforts of religious revivalists such as Alexander Bedward and activists such as Marcus Garvey that black Jamaicans found political messages that resonated with them. Unfortunately, Bedward's career was ended by his eccentric fanaticism and Garvey's chaotic movements undermined his calls for unity among black Jamaicans. The rise of Rastafarianism offered an alternative implicit rejection of the status quo but it never became a galvanising political force. Positive developments occurred for Jamaicans between 1866 and 1945, including improvements to public health and elementary educational provision, land reform for the peasantry, the emergence of middle-class professional occupations among brown Jamaicans and the growth of the banana industry to boost export incomes. Equally, however, there were downsides as well, especially the persistence of extensive poverty, unemployment, poor

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housing, congestion in the largest city, Kingston, and continuing white colonial dominance. The major labour demonstrations in 1938 brought to the surface the inequalities experienced by most Jamaicans.

The history of Jamaica since 1945, covered in Chapter 6, has witnessed major and fairly rapid changes. Crown Colony government was succeeded in 1944 by a bicameral legislature and the rapid growth of two major political parties, the People's National Party (PNP) and the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), and by a brief period of four years (1958–62) where Jamaica participated in a West Indian Federation. As part of the process of decolonisation, Jamaica was granted independence in 1962 after which it was governed by alternating prime ministers of the two major political parties. No third political party has ever made headway in Jamaica. Since 1945 the Jamaican economy has diversified considerably, notably in the rise of the tourism sector and the rise of bauxite exports, but there are still many ways in which poverty and poor health prospects for many Jamaicans have not been overcome. Jamaica has flourished in the modern world as a centre of excellence for sport, notably athletics and cricket, as a contributor to different styles of popular music, from ska to reggae, and as a creator of artistic achievements in painting, literature and the plastic arts. However, contemporary Jamaica has experienced a considerable underside of social life in terms of drug cartels, gang violence, political corruption and economic woes, and it is difficult to project whether, in the early 2020s, these problems will be eradicated or whether they will continue as a major blot on Jamaican life.

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As these statements suggest, it is not feasible to interpret Jamaica's historical trajectory as one of Whiggish progress. The optimism and positive demeanour of many Jamaicans today, the welcome they extend to visitors and the efforts of the Jamaican government to improve social and economic conditions for their people are underpinned by a legacy of racial divisions, social inequalities, urban deprivation and health problems that are a continuing challenge to the island's politicians and people. Some of these difficulties can be traced to historical problems; others are self-inflicted. The history of Jamaica is very much an uneasy mixture of positive and negative developments that continually interact without clear signs that the difficulties are likely to be overcome. This book tries to evaluate these different facets of Jamaica's history, and my hope is that it will serve multiple readerships, from the educated public to specialists in Jamaican, Caribbean and Atlantic history, and to students at all levels.

I

The Taino



The first inhabitants of most of the Greater Antilles, including Jamaica, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Hispaniola, were an Amerindian group known as the Taino. Any overview of Jamaica's history must necessarily begin with an assessment of these people, examining their culture, communities and impact on human settlement. This is not easy to achieve because the history of the Jamaican Tainos is only partially known to historians and archaeologists owing to limited surviving ethnographic evidence and other absences in the historical and archaeological record. Thus, the Tainos left no written documents, and many sites that would yield information about Jamaica's human habitation before the arrival of Columbus have been destroyed by modern property and infrastructural development. Archaeological information and the testimony of Spanish visitors and conquerors are less plentiful for Jamaica than for Cuba, Puerto Rico and Hispaniola. Poor genetic data (DNA) preservation in Jamaica is one consequence of a patchy archaeological record. This is complicated by the fact that modern Caribbean genomes mainly comprise evidence of European and African lines of descent rather than indigenous Caribbean ancestry.

Given the large gaps in the documentary and archaeological record, and in the biological proof relating to ancestry, it is tempting to infer Taino cultural patterns