EMPIRE'S CROSSROADS

A History of the Caribbean From Columbus to the Present Day

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Introduction

On the mountainous island of Martinique, at the edge of La Savane park, in the capital, Fort-de-France, there is a statue of a headless woman. Under the shade of leafy trees, and mounted on a sturdy plinth, she is dressed in the type of empire-waist gown that was fashionable in the late eighteenth century. In her right hand she holds a rose to her chest, her left is resting on top of a large cameo, on it carved the profile of Napoleon Bonaparte. The statue is of his first wife, Marie-Josèphe-Rose Tascher de la Pagerie, perhaps the most famous (or, indeed, infamous) daughter of Martinique. She was born to sugar-planter parents in Trois-Îlets, across the bay from Fort-de-France.

No one is certain when she was decapitated, but the head is long gone and there has never been any effort to fashion a new one for the Rose of Martinique, as she was known. Lashings of red paint now adorn her body. The antipathy from Martinicans comes not just from the fact that she was a planter's daughter, or that she was Napoleon's wife, but from the convergence of the two: many islanders believe she convinced him to reinstate slavery in the French colonies eight years after its abolition in 1794 in order to protect her family's fortunes. There is no evidence that she said anything to Napoleon about slavery, but the myth lives on.

Something about this story captures almost every element of Caribbean history: the connection between the tiny island and powerful people in Europe; the legacy of slavery; the persistence of myths and legends; and the idiosyncratic way that it has been memorialized. The statue remains in the island's capital, headless and daubed with paint, facing the sea.

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'Empire' might seem an anachronistic term to use in the title of this book. The trend in scholarly arenas is for the more encompassing 'global', which conjures fewer images of pith-helmeted imperialism, and allows for the inclusion of a wider range of nations and people. But the reality is that the modern Caribbean, from 1492 onwards, was the product of an encounter between Europeans and other peoples. That is not to say Europeans *made* the islands what they are, but that they started a process both destructive and constructive that has led them to become what they are today. Europeans eradicated most of the islands' indigenous past. Indeed, it is increasingly accepted that Columbus did not 'discover' the Americas, but rather that he led a march on their people while

thinking he was in the Far East. The early period of West Indian, and by extension American, discovery and settlement was a time of upheaval made all the more unusual and deadly because of the toxic combination of guns and germs. To be sure, disease did its part in wiping out large swathes of the Amerindian population, but Europeans did not stand idly by as smallpox swept through. They took advantage of the situation. The clash between the new and old worlds brought about death and destruction, of course, but it also allowed for the development of new processes, including transatlantic slavery. It was the creation, quite literally, of new worlds on top of old lands that gives the islands their unique place in history. This was also aided by the fact that so little was known, understood, or recorded about indigenous life on the islands, whereas, in contrast, a great deal more of the nearby Aztec and Inca states survived and was discussed – not always without problems.

However, the credit for making the diverse islands of the West Indies what they are today lies with the people: the surviving Amerindians, the large number of Africans, the smattering of Europeans, and, later, the people born and raised in the Caribbean, the 'creoles'. This is reflected by a diversity throughout the islands' music, food, art, dance and other cultural forms – but also, paradoxically, between the shared history of that diversity. Yet even the recognition of this has been a long time coming. Europeans were hardly kind in writing about the islands, or the people in them. The English novelist Anthony Trollope, in an 1859 account of his tour around the islands, wrote about the island-born people of African descent he met in Jamaica: 'They have no country of their own, yet have they not hitherto any country of their adoption for, whether as slaves in Cuba, or as free labourers in the British isles, they are in each case a servile people in a foreign land. They have no language of their own . . . they have no idea of country, and no pride of race.'[1] St Lucian poet Derek Walcott, in his Nobel Lecture of 1992, made reference to 'Trollope's "non-people"' in a passage about Port of Spain, a city in which it was possible to embrace what Trollope had rejected. The city, Walcott wrote, had 'a downtown babel of shop signs and streets, mongrelized,polyglot,a ferment without a history, like heaven. Because that is what such a city is, in the New World, a writer's heaven.'[2] But the white European and later North American views and all the racist ideas embedded in them dominated the written accounts of the Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and often these and documents written and organized by white colonial officials may be all the interested historian has reference to. It was not until the later decades of the twentieth that many of these ideas were refuted and rejected, though some

ongoing stereotypes seem to have been carved in stone.

Empire is crucial, because the more than five hundred years of European rule in Caribbean waters cannot be washed away, even if many people would like it to be. Many of the islands are now independent, and the era of imperial rule is a fading memory. But there is no ignoring the legacy. At the same time, the history of the Caribbean is not simply a tale of European powers and African slaves; a much wider global story has developed that stretches from the United States to China. Empire is not a static word either– its meanings range from asserting direct political control to more indirect economic dominance.

However, 'empire' in this book does not offer a reassuring narrative about how the Spanish or British or French or Dutch brought order or civilization to these islands. To be clear: Europeans brought destruction, chaos, and disorder. They may have built roads and set up bureaucracies, or maintained a semblance of control through the repression of dissent or uprising,but as becomes clear early on,resistance and rebellion was all around.

Making sense of these multiple and conflicting strands is far from straightforward. For every tranquil planter there was a rebellious slave. For every bored colonial administrator there was a subordinate subverting the system. But there was also a great degree of cooperation, and assimilation, too. Life was often not as dichotomized as it has frequently been presented. If there is an over arching narrative here, it is not of progress, or development, but persistence: this is what happened, good and bad, after Europeans arrived. If all the islands of the Caribbean could be amalgamated and anthropomorphized, the resulting person would have been taken from the African coast, worked as a pirate, been forced into slavery, toiled in a cane field, fought in a war, been freed, squatted on land, become a unionized labourer, and run a tourist resort. This is an exaggeration, of course, but the character of the West Indies has everything to do with surviving the many brutalities, restrictions, and challenges served up by people from Europe, and later the United States. And that is not to mention the ongoing struggles against nature in a region regularly battered by hurricanes, as well as periodic earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. If there is one thing at the heart of this story, it is the genius of adaptation. This is what the clash of worlds – as violent as any force of nature – demanded. Adaptation – to diaspora, to disease, to slavery, to racism, to earthquakes, to poverty, to tourism – was the response to an exhausting series of events. Yet, as the cultural theorist Stuart Hall has pointed out, the Caribbean, to Western eyes, is 'very much "the same". We belong to the marginal, the underdeveloped, the periphery, the"Other". We are at the outer edge, the "rim", of the metropolitan world –

always “South” to someone else’s *El Norte*.’[3]

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History is no mere collection of inert facts and dates. It can be manipulated, shaped, stretched, and moulded. Sweeping historical narratives have a complex social psychology. They often speak to a collective need to feel that transgressions of the past were not so bad, or perhaps that they were worse than we could have possibly imagined, or that things were awful and we helped to change them. Histories help a nation define what it is, or indeed what people would *like* it to be. Yet the past cannot so neatly be packed into boxes, and the story that unfolds in this book is often one of extremes: brutality and liberation, oppression and freedom. History has long been used for political ends. Consider the more recent examples: the appropriation of the Boston Tea Party by right-wing Republicans in the US; or, in Britain, the ongoing debate between the government and professional historians about the narrow, Anglocentric school history curriculum. In relation to the Caribbean, by extension,the idea that somehow Columbus and other Europeans brought civilization rather than destroyed it has been a tenacious myth,though it is one that is finally being chipped away.

Thinking about the wider West Indies and how to place them means piecing together a story that has long since fragmented. Histories tend to be linguistically and imperially grouped, not least because so much archival or source material is in English, Spanish, French, or Dutch, and so language often guides research. But there is also the issue of nationalism. As islands like Jamaica or Cuba make sense of their own history, they necessarily push aside a wider story in favour of a more focused one.

The second half of the book’s title – *Crossroads* – references the history of the West Indies as one of connections and crossings, such as the planter’s daughter from Martinique who married a self-proclaimed emperor of France. Today, to many people, the idea of the islands is best represented by a generic image of blue water and palm trees, yet each of the islands has its own rich, dense history that extends across the globe, far beyond the Caribbean. There is a spiritual dimension too, as religious scholars Ennis Edmonds and Michelle Gonzalez point out:‘In Afro-Caribbean religions, the spiritual entity Papa Legba, or Elegguá, rules over the crossroads – the symbolic juncture between the human and the realm of the spirits, the pathway between present realities and the African past, the point that separates the present and the future, the place of ritual transformation and empowerment, and the site of decision and

opportunity.’[4]

The shipping lanes in and out of these islands brought the world together. Silks moved from China to Panama to Spain and onwards. People moved, too; the seas could be a means to liberation and living outside the law, or a conduit to the living hell of enslavement. The sea also was the bringer of goods. Eager islanders awaited shipments of European wares, while Europeans demanded ever more ship loads of commodities to give them their sugar fix, or tobacco hit. The sort of global commodity chains we take for granted today – the ones that bring us iPads and cheap shoes– were forged in this period.

But some caution should be exercised. Claiming to be the first ‘modern’ place or the earliest ‘globalized’ nation is a bit of an ivory tower arms race. Historians in many areas –medieval Europe, seventeenth-century India, fifteenth-century China – have claimed the roots of the modern world are to be found firmly planted in Westphalia, Bengal, or Shanghai. This is a contest with no clear winner. However, the links between the West Indies and the rest of the world certainly made them a contender for claims to early global connections. Within a relatively short space of time, the rise of European colonialism in the West Indies linked Santo Domingo to Manila, and Trinidad to India. There were other trade circuits, to be sure, but none that spanned east and west to such a degree – the route becoming faster still after the awkward trek across the Panamanian isthmus ended with the opening of the Panama Canal in the twentieth century.

The Caribbean was both factory and marketplace. Fortunes were made and lost growing sugar and other crops; smaller islands could trade in global goods, at times flouting both commercial laws and tax regimes. It was an important hub in the development of the modern world economy. But, like the sweat shops of the present, the cost of such economic development was borne by the exploited workers; these islands were also the site of demographic upheaval and displacement in the name of profit, as African labourers were brought to their shores. Then, as the era of slavery drew to a close, Indians and Chinese followed these imperial paths to the doors of Trinidad, Guyana,* and Jamaica, with some even diverting to Cuba. In these small places, people from around the world lived together. The story was not always a happy one, but the outcome made the islands like nowhere else.

* Guyana is the modern, post-independence spelling of British Guiana, the former colony. I use the nomenclature appropriate to the time and status of the country..

Another critical aspect of the Caribbean is the emotions it fostered. It was at once a place of dreams,of fantasy,of riches,of sexual excess. And it was feared as a graveyard, in both a physical and a spiritual sense. Millions of people –

Europeans, Africans, Asians – died from tropical diseases until scientific advances and public health reined in the killing power of the mosquito and other carriers. But there were also concerns that life on these islands could ruin a European's moral health, making them lascivious and corrupt degenerates, revelling in their ill-gotten gains. Columbus set about his mission looking for gold; the sugar planters arrived seeking their fortunes; and today's tourist steps off the plane to be whisked away to a villa where all cares are to be swept aside. The islands have continued to foster fantasy, often completely at odds with their reality. At first glance it does look like paradise: the blue sky, and impossibly clear turquoise water, the sand, the palm trees, the gentle caress of the sea breezes. Yet most islanders face an everyday struggle for survival amid such natural splendour. The dreams work both ways as well – many islanders cannot find what they are looking for in the Caribbean, and instead set off to the United States or Europe in pursuit of whatever that may be.

It is perhaps unfashionable to say so, but there is a great deal of the present in the Caribbean's past. Although the adage that history repeats itself is tiresome, there are patterns here that cannot be ignored. Certain themes arise again and again in today's world: slavery (waged, or otherwise); environmental crises; wild and destructive stock-market bubbles; unfair trade; political repression. It is perhaps best left to the philosophers to question the seemingly repetitive quality of human malfeasance, but the parallels and precursors are clear for all to see. Before there was a campaign against sweatshop labour, there was one against buying Caribbean sugar; before there was the toppling of Saddam Hussein, there was the overthrow of the government in Guatemala. The answers are not necessarily to be found in the past, but the clues are. The history of the Caribbean is a history that belongs to everyone.

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My own relationship to the Caribbean is born of two things. The first is a nagging disquiet over the fact that so much of Caribbean history was transformed – deformed – by the worthless commodity of sugar. Of course, it wasn't financially worthless, then or now, but the human body does not need it to survive. A system of suppression and enslavement underpinned a human desire for the superfluous. The initial hunt for gold and silver is easier to understand – these metals had a value, which is why the Spanish were searching for them. But sugar, a useless by-product of a breed of grass, shaped not only West Indian history, but the rise of consumer society. There had to be a hunger there, greed. It also needed a large labour supply, empty land with the right climatic conditions, a philosophical moment when agriculture was seen as the

route to riches, and a trade network that put a high value on it. There also had to be a gap between the production and consumption of a good, which was soon in place as well, and European sugar use expanded and a blind eye was turned to the source. There are clear parallels to be made about more modern commodities, for instance sweatshop-produced clothing, or the illegal drug trade. The dream of easy wealth at the expense of someone else's misery is one that refuses to die.

The second entry point is more personal. I am not of Caribbean origin, nor, as far as I know, did any of my family have interests in the islands. But I spent my childhood in the Deep South of the United States in the 1980s, moving there less than twenty years after segregation had ended. The scars from that period were real and visceral. It seemed at the time that the Caribbean, or at least what little I knew or understood of it, offered a different story, one that provided a more positive ending to an ugly period in the history of the Americas. It is a shared history, after all. The elements are similar – encounter, exploitation, slavery, emancipation, displacement, migration – but they seem to be jumbled up, like a box of puzzle pieces. This, certainly, was a child's perspective, and what I came to discover was not better or worse but, of course, different. There were nasty episodes and triumphant ones. But it instilled in me a lasting curiosity about the region that has developed into a passion over the past decade of writing and research. There is a long shared history between the US and the West Indies, and especially between the Southern states and the islands, but one that is too rarely thought about or acknowledged. In many ways the historical glow that continues to radiate from the American War of Independence overshadows other narratives: the story of the *Americas*. The thirteen colonies and later the US were far more than a backdrop or trading partner, but a steadily rising behemoth that the whole hemisphere, for better or worse, had to learn to coexist with. The obsession with the 'exceptionalism' of the US can push aside any wider or often more nuanced view of this relationship.

Then again, comparing one place that was fairly homogeneous – the Southern US –to a collection of more than twenty islands and numerous coastal countries with different languages and people is like comparing one orange to a barrel of fruit. To write about the 'Caribbean' at all seems a bit outdated. With all the islands' internal diversity, is there any point? Some of these islands are independent nations, others are colonies; some speak English, others Papiamento. Some are prosperous, some are bankrupt. Some are stable democracies, others are failed states. Is it too much of a stretch, then, to try to bring them together? There is a shared heritage that goes all the way back to their very formation. Although the islands stretch across a territory of around

3,000 miles, under the water there are ancient links. Some 50 million years ago, the Greater Antilles islands of Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, and the scattered islets of the Bahamas, the Turks and Caicos, and the British Virgin Islands were forged out of tectonic plates, giving the larger of these islands dramatic interior mountain ranges, and carving out deep oceanic troughs, such as the Puerto Rico trench. The backbone of the Caribbean, the small islands of the Lesser Antilles, were formed when the small Caribbean tectonic plate collided with its neighbours, resulting in a string of volcanoes, as the Barbadian writer George Lamming has poetically described it, scattered in a 'curve of dots and distances'.[5] For all that shared past, physical and historical, the twentieth-century fragmentation has persisted. Over the course of my research I realized there was a bumpy road in trying to follow their path, and an even rockier one in putting it in the context of the Americas more broadly. The history of the US is one expressed more confidently, often with narrative arcs involving good guys and bad guys. The story of the Caribbean is more diffused, dappled, a ramble with shadows and light rather than a march to triumph under a blazing sun. The water between the islands has seemingly widened, and they have become consumed, not unreasonably, in understanding their own individual histories.

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It is a regrettable inevitability that a work such as this must, by its very nature, be the product of a net cast deep and wide. Trawling produces a range of sources – not least of which are the numerous excellent studies in which many dedicated historians mine archives and reveal new insights as to how the West Indies functioned in the past and how it continues to function today. This is the foundation for any general history, and my debt to these historians is great. There are also the limitations of the writer: my primary research interest was the Spanish Caribbean, while the many years I have lived in Britain took me to the shores of the Anglophone islands. It is not my intention to give short shrift to the French and Dutch (and Danish) islands, but I will be the first to say that my French does not measure up to my Spanish, and my Dutch and Danish require outsourcing. But whatever the language, English included, any mistakes or oversights are most certainly my own. The Caribbean lends itself to the mosaic approach to history – there are so many fragments to use and arrange.

Archives presented more of a challenge – it is far more straightforward to find recent or crucial scholarly books and journals. Looking for undiscovered archival gems can be a needle-in-a-haystack activity, often made more difficult by the elements. For instance, a hurricane can wipe out almost all the holdings, as happened in Bluefields, Nicaragua. Many other repositories have been

neglected, though this can be turned around by political will, as the impressive results in the Dominican Republic illustrate. In recent years, too, there have been enormous efforts to preserve what remains by organizations such as Florida International University's Digital Library of the Caribbean. National institutions such as the Archivo General de Indias in Seville have also done a great deal of digitizing, and the wealth of material that can be accessed from home seems to multiply exponentially with every log-on. Though it may seem like a colonial legacy, many important documents about Caribbean history remain either to the north in the United States, or across the Atlantic in Europe. Given that this is the case, and given the rather woeful state of many archives throughout the area, why go there at all? There were hot, flustered, frustrating moments when I asked myself that very question. Yet experiencing the places themselves was an essential part of the writing of this book. Sadly, I could not spend months in each archive, any more than I could hope to visit every place that can be considered part of the region. But for the record, I spent time (in order of appearance) in: Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica, St Martin, St Eustatius, St Maarten, St Bart's, St Kitts & Nevis, Antigua, Dominica, Martinique, Barbados, Grenada, Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, Curaçao, Bonaire, and Aruba.

My focus is more on the islands than the surrounding shores, but the area is huge, and the interconnected stories converge and diverge, which means that I cannot claim to have treated each and every island and all the surrounding countries equally. Bermuda, the Bahamas, Venezuela, Colombia, Central America, and some of the smaller islands get relatively little attention against Cuba or Haiti. This is also the case with Mexico. Although Veracruz was an important trade centre within the Caribbean, I limit its role here, as the history of pre-and post-Columbian Mexico have rightly been the subject of numerous books. The same goes for Brazil – a country with a large and complex history of which there are many accounts, and likewise with Colombia and Venezuela.

It may seem contradictory to include Guyana,Suriname, and French Guiana; but I would contend that these three places, two of which are now independent nations, were established in the same spirit as the islands, and in the case of Guyana (Britain) and Suriname (Netherlands), were also in the sugar-and-slavery circuit. French Guiana followed a somewhat different path when sugar failed to take root. Modern Guyana especially is part of the British West Indies; its cricketers and writers part of a Caribbean tradition, rather than a South American one. And, in a way, these three territories are like islands, hemmed in as they are not only by rivers and jungle, but also linguistically, on a continent where Spanish and Portuguese dominate. For this reason, I have given their story

more weight than other parts of South America.

In the same vein, tiny Dutch St Eustatius was a key intersection in Atlantic trade networks in the 1700s, though its twentieth-century story is somewhat more muted, whereas Cuba had a quiet beginning while the conquistadors were elsewhere searching for El Dorado, yet by the mid-1800s it dominated the other islands in terms of population and wealth. It is impossible to treat each island equally across time and space; rather, I am trying to put together a large, disparate puzzle. The great French historian Fernand Braudel elegantly summed up this quandary in the introduction to his seminal work on the Mediterranean:

> The basic problem, however, remains the same. It is the problem confronting every historical undertaking. Is it possible somehow to convey simultaneously both that conspicuous history which holds our attention by its continual and dramatic changes – and that other, submerged, history, almost silent and always discreet, virtually unsuspected either by its observers or its participants, which is little touched by the obstinate erosion of time?[6]

This book does not contain every fact about every island. There are no extensive indexes or appendixes on every battle, every sugar shipment, and every planter. Rather, the aim is twofold. The first is to present a picture of this complex region, and how this new world grew out of the violent combination of many others: European, African, Amerindian, Asian, North American, while becoming a crucial link in the global chain of goods, peoples, and ideas. Second, a history of the Caribbean is a chance to meditate on a few modern issues, not least so-called ‘globalization’ and consumerism. Alongside this, a history of the Caribbean is a chance to think about the contradictions and complexities of the past, and of the present.