

BOOK REVIEWS

THE TRAGEDY OF BARBADOS

"The Economic Geography of Barbados," by Otis P. Starkey. Columbia University Press, New York. 1940. 228 pp. \$3.00.

The story of Barbados is the story of poverty; cold, stark, unmitigated poverty. It is the story of tragedy; deep, naked, recurring tragedy. It is also the story of nature's fury and man's ignorance; destructive hurricanes, widespread epidemics, deadly pestilences.

A plague in 1647 killed 6,000 inhabitants, or about one-third of the population. In 1663 "strange and unusual caterpillars came upon the land and devoured all things." A fire in 1666 destroyed Bridgetown, the capital. A drought in 1668 was accompanied by an epidemic which lasted until 1670. A new tax, amounting to 10% of profits, "was the final blow to the prosperity of the island." (p. 77) It burdened trade until 1837. A major hurricane in 1675 caused terrible havoc. The Governor reported in 1677 that land was held for higher prices than in England! Due to war and disease the white population steadily declined between 1689 and 1713. The hurricane of October 1780 almost destroyed the island. Deaths exceeded births in every year from 1776 to 1803. The Great Hurricane of 1831 caused 8 million dollars damage and took 1,600 lives. The cholera epidemic of 1854 cost the lives of 20,727. Another terrible hurricane visited the island in September 1898. An epidemic of smallpox occurred in 1902.

The Government of Barbados does little to anticipate the arrival of hurricanes, except to arrange a system of storm warnings, and to appoint a day for "special supplication to Almighty God, for deliverance from storm." (p. 196)

Barbadian history, writes Professor Starkey, has been a series of economic booms and collapses. The World War brought unparalleled prosperity, which ended abruptly with the crash in sugar prices in 1921.

The year 1921-22, he writes, "can be described.....as probably one of the most difficult the colony has experienced in recent times." (p. 133)

The principal crop, sugar, has been marketed at a loss continuously for the past five years, reported the British Official Gazette (August 1935).

Such are the highlights in the melancholy picture.

Barbados, 100 miles north of South America near the Southern end of the Lesser Antilles, is about one-half the area of New York City. It has a population of 170,000, 93% of whom are colored, and has been a British colony since 1625.

The Barbadian environment, writes Professor Starkey, offers a fertile soil, a pleasant oceanic climate, and an excellent position for world trade. The island is rich in natural resources, and exports millions of dollars worth of sugar and molasses. "Nearly half of the acreage of Barbados is occupied with cane fields; fields of waving cane are always a conspicuous feature of the Barbadian landscape." (p. 38)

Two chapters of this book, each 30 pages in length, describe Barbadian economy. One is entitled "Production"; the other "Consumption". *There is no discussion of the distribution of wealth in Barbados*; no hint why this island, so rich in natural resources, fails to support its workers.

Today fully one-third of the population is on relief: "The total would be increased much more if the recipients were given relief adequate to maintain the health of the people. The need is not so much for more medical relief as for more and better foods." (p. 197)

Professor Starkey lists typical diets of Barbadian working class adults. These cost from 42 cents to \$1.05 each per week. "There is little doubt that the high infantile death rate in Barbados is largely

due to malnutrition and to diseases which result from it. The diet of the average Barbadian worker is so close to the minimum necessary for life that any food shortages are likely to have immediate repercussions on the health of the laboring class. Young children seem most susceptible to such food deficiencies." (p. 188)

I was informed that a handful of Englishmen, eight in number, owned most of the island. I sought verification, but local authorities for reasons of their own, ignored my request for information.

Only males with an annual income of \$250 or over, may vote. This shuts out 82% of the adult population, including all laborers: "The legislature represents primarily the merchant, planter, and the professional classes."

"The functions of the Government are primarily to protect the interests of the upper classes by protecting property, aiding agriculture and commerce, and *relieving the laboring class sufficiently to prevent disturbances.*" (p. 192)

Petty crimes are common, especially when laborers are jobless and unable to buy food. Larcenies and riots mount in hard years. (p. 194)

It is obvious to a Georgeist that Barbados fails to collect its community-created rent. There can be no other explanation for the appalling poverty in the midst of plenty which everywhere meets the eye. Giving away the people's land rent, the Government must maintain itself by seizures, called taxes. The poor colored woman who daily trudges to town bearing on her head a fifty pound basket of oranges and sweets which she peddles in the torrid alleys of Bridgetown, must pay a fee for the privilege (?). The emaciated boy who rides a cheap bicycle over the rough dirt roads is mulct. The owner of every hut and wooden shack (it would be an insult to call them homes) annually pays a tax equal to one month's rent. Barbadians must pay a heavy duty on food and clothing imported from the United States. The Government reveals no information about income taxes except the total amount paid each year. (p. 184)

Suffering low purchasing power, the natives are poorly housed and shabbily dressed; many eke out an existence on one meal a day. "In poor years the death rate increases rapidly, especially because of the high infantile death rate. Malnutrition seems to be the ultimate cause, although diseases are listed as the immediate cause." (p. 207)

Conditions in recent years have become unbearable, not only in Barbados, but throughout all the British West Indies. Rioting and bloodshed have occurred in Nevis, St. Kitts, and Jamaica, as well as in Barbados.

In 1938 the Government appointed a Royal Commission to study the whole question. Their report has never been published; the disclosures would be too awful. In the debate in the British House of Commons, one member contributed this blasting, but truthful, summary: "It is clear that there is a festering mass of unemployment, a great surplus of unemployed population, wretched housing conditions, inadequate medical services, infinite squalor, illegitimacy and destitution."

A few recommendations of the Commission have been made public. One, that the British tax payer contribute \$100,000,000 over a period of twenty years, to purchase West Indian land for settlement by the natives. Our British contemporary, *Land and Liberty*, commented on this (April 1940). "It is the policy of the British government not to destroy the institution which is responsible for poverty . . . but to buy off and compensate the monopoly . . ."

Britain today is undergoing her ordeal by fire and sword. Georgeists perceive that war stems from economic injustice and inequality, such as persist in Barbados. If a just order such as Henry George envisaged, shall follow, the war will not have been fought in vain; the cruelties inflicted on millions of innocent men, women and children, the terrible loss of life, home and goods, will not have been suffered for nought.

—BENJAMIN W. BURGER