

## WARNING FROM THE WEST INDIES

THE GROWING discontent of the population of the West Indies and the appointment of a Royal Commission to investigate conditions there make the reissue in popular form (Penguin Series, price 6d.) of Mr W. M. MacMillan's *Warning from the West Indies* a timely publication.

The broad outline of the picture is not hard to grasp. A century ago the coloured population were slaves. They had as a matter of course no rights to the land of the islands. When they were emancipated from slavery, they continued in the same condition and were obliged to earn a living by working for those who owned the land.

The power of the landowners was, and still is, safeguarded by a political constitution which, with its two legislative chambers and its restricted franchise, resembles that of this country before the franchise was extended and the powers of the House of Lords curtailed. Lack of political rights inevitably leads to extra-parliamentary agitation, and sometimes to disorder, but it would be fair to say that in view of the grievances of the people they have behaved with remarkable restraint.

Precise statistics of landownership have not been collected by the governments of the islands. Returns of land holdings, obtained in some cases for purposes of taxation, do not give a true picture, because the holders may be tenants, and the number of landowners must be very much less.

"A large proportion, three-quarters or more, of the real peasant holdings, are mere half-acre plots" and therefore insufficient to afford the holders a livelihood. Many holdings are cultivated on the *metayer* or share-cropping system. Some of those which appear to be small holdings are owned by absentee proprietors. In Jamaica "the Land Department which had informed a local inquirer that the number of smallholders in 1929 was 150,000, surprised him in 1934 . . . by giving the total as only 114,000."

Mr MacMillan is, however, able to give the following particulars which throw some light on the distribution of land ownership:—

"In that other 'overwhelmingly peasant' island of Nevis, I gathered that the total of peasant owners, including those on two Government settlement schemes, is only some 600. In Nevis also, and still more in Montserrat, to some extent in Dominica and elsewhere—including islets like Carriacou, off Grenada—landowners, sometimes absentees, leave the land to be tilled by *metayers*. Trinidad, by one estimate, had 8,132 peasant owners, but also something approaching 18,000 'cane farmers,' most of them tenants; an indefinite number rented ricelands or gardens; but not enough in any of these categories to provide for a population of 400,000. In Barbados, the greatest of the sugar islands, amazingly little land lies waste and some 18,000 of its 176,000 inhabitants were said to have small holdings, with a total acreage of 13,943; though in this island five acres was officially held to be the minimum needed for a decent subsistence, 77 per cent of the small holders had less than one acre. Antigua had a few hundred peasants including those on at least two small Government-controlled settlement schemes, also some *metayers* and rent-paying tenants. In St Kitts on the other hand, where also sugar is 'king,' there were practically no peasant owners and few *metayers*: at most some estate labourers had gardens allowed them, usually in the hills—not necessarily rent free."

In Jamaica, according to Lord Olivier, "58.7 per cent of all the privately owned land is registered as belonging

to only 1,391 proprietors," and, adds Mr MacMillan, "to a still smaller number of individuals."

The other side of the picture is that a small minority are extremely well off. "In Barbadoes and Jamaica numbers of merchants, planters, and others live comfortably and their standards are quite high; in Jamaica in a poor year, 1932, fifty-two individuals or companies paid income tax on assessments of over £5,000, nine of these on more than £20,000, while 146 paid on from £2,000 to £5,000."

Wages are deplorably low, ranging from 1s. 2d. to 3s. a day for day labourers, and it would appear that work is obtainable only irregularly and that many of the inhabitants suffer long periods of unemployment.

Taxation falls heavily upon these meagre earnings. It appears that there is usually a flat rate tax of one shilling an acre on land with a percentage tax on the annual rental value of houses, and in Trinidad even the meanest hovel has a minimum value of £5 a year attached to it.

In Jamaica the nominal rateable value of such a house is £40!

Still more burdensome is the indirect taxation imposed. Large quantities of foodstuffs, such as corn and wheat flour and salt fish are imported, and are subjected to tariffs. "Taxation thus adds materially to the burden on the wages which are in most islands the only means of livelihood of the great majority. So also does the duty on clothing."

The difficulty of obtaining land has driven a large proportion of the population into the towns to eke out a living by casual labour, and live in slums. "Basseterre in St Kitts had apparently nearly half, 9,000 out of a total of 19,000, many of the 9,000 being estate labourers for whom in this island planters had no ground to spare. The town and metropolitan district of Castries in St Lucia were estimated to have 19,000 inhabitants out of the total of 61,000 in an undeveloped island where there is no lack of unused land."

The "landless proletariat" is at the root of West Indian problems. The planters complain that the people "won't work," but the underlying basis of political policies is to keep down wages and prevent the people from working for themselves. Where small attempts have been made by the governments to provide land, the plots have been so small that it was impossible for the holder to earn an independent living on them. "A Barbadoes report, deploring the ill-success of peasants on the few estates which have been broken up into small holdings, has blamed the high purchase price and their inadequate size."

"In these islands greatly increased production of food crops for home consumption is not merely desirable but essential, for the bettering of the low standards of living of the producers themselves. But anything like a general policy even of gardens for all would threaten the labour supply; it was likely therefore to be quickly checked if any government was ever inclined to carry its zeal for peasant cultivation to such lengths."

If ever there were a clear case for land and taxation reform, breaking up the monopoly of land by a tax on land values and relieving the homes and necessities of life of the people from taxation, it is to be found in the West Indies.

"My voice, though but humble, was raised for thy right,  
My vote, as a freeman's, still voted thee free,  
This hand, though but feeble, would arm in thy fight,  
And this heart, though outworn, had a throb still for thee!"

Lord Byron.