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# SPANISH JAMAICA

by

PATRICK BRYAN

Spanish place names, and distortions of some of those Spanish place names, are the principal reminder that Jamaica was a Spanish colony for 161 years, between 1494 when Columbus claimed the island in the name of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, and 1655 when the Lord Protector of England, Oliver Cromwell, launched his Western Design. Names such as St. Jago de la Vega, (Santiago de la Vega), Oracabessa (Cabeza de Oro), Ocho Rios (Las Chorreras), Rio Minho, Rio Cobre, Rio Grande all testify to a Spanish and indeed to a Jewish-Portuguese presence in the island. Is Mathra Brae, possibly Mata da Praia? And then, there are the Pedro Plains (wrongly pronounced), and Great Pedro Bay, savanna-la-Mar, Mount Diablo (Devil Mountain), Montego Bay (Manteca Bay), Port Maria (Port Mary), Port Antonio (Port Anthony). There is of course Don Christopher's Point: and the name Spanish Town is a lasting reminder that Spanish settlers had built this little town near the south coast to administer the small colony. The Spanish crown had recommended to Columbus that he name the island Santiago in honour of the patron saint of Spain – Santiago (St. James), but the original Taino name "Jamaica" defied all efforts to change it. There is Rio Nuevo, Rio Bueno, Rio Magno, Port Esquivel, (Juan de Esquivel was one of Jamaica's first Spanish governors), Potosi, Santa Cruz (Holy Cross), and Porus was possibly named after the Porrás brothers who rose against Columbus during his one year sojourn in Jamaica

## **Columbus and Jamaica**

The Genoese sea-captain, Christopher Columbus, working in the service of castille, first sighted Jamaica on May 5, 1494, in the course of his second voyage to the Americas. On his fourth and last voyage beginning in 1502 he was forced to land in Jamaica because of the poor condition of his ships. He was to remain in the island for one full year, from June 24th, 1502 to June 29, 1503.

the absorption of Jamaica into the European system is part of the broader canvas of European expansion overseas, and the nature of European expansion had been influenced by specific features of European society. The end of the fifteenth century saw the emergence of the nation state in Europe generally. In Spain, which underwrote the voyages of Columbus, the formation of the nation state had been accompanied by a

seven hundred year war against the Moors and the reconquest by Christian (Catholic Spaniards of a country dominated by Islam. If Spanish Catholicism proved to be particularly bellicose and aggressive it must be attributed, in part at least, to the reality that in the fifteenth century religion and nationalism, religion and the formation of the nation-state, had become inseparable in the Spanish mind. The fortunes of Holy Church, buttressed by an Inquisition which vetted men's beliefs with powers of life and death, were at once an ideology for expansion, a justification for conquest, and a guarantee of eternal life. Not surprisingly, Ferdinand and Isabella (of Aragon and Castille respectively) were and remain "*Los Reyes Catolicos*" - the Catholic monarchs. At the same time, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that the Spanish religious instinct always presupposed piety. Benassar's description of Spanish life in the sixteenth century records for us aspects of the vulgarity and coarseness of daily life, the blasphemous conduct, and a sexual life that failed to measure up to the standards imposed by Mother church on its flocks. Religious militancy did not preclude, either, a dedication to the acquisition of material goods. Indeed, the association between materialism and idealism is best summarised by Bernal Diaz del Castillo who fought beside Hernan Cortes in Mexico: "I came to serve God and to get rich."

Another feature of Spanish life was the existence of black slavery in the Iberian peninsula. True it is that the enslavement of Africans in Spain was a substantially different thing from what it was to become in the Americas, but the concept of enslavement of man by man was justified by practice, and entrenched in the regulatory laws of Alfonso the Wise of Spain in the body of laws called the *Siete Partidas*. The Spanish nobility also created social distance between itself and the mass of Spaniards by supporting a huge dependent domestic class.

I have indicated that the fifteenth century saw the development of the nation-state in Europe, whose society gradually was emerging out of that system of social, economic, military and political relations broadly described as feudalism. The transition was not complete at the end of the fifteenth century, it is true; but the evidence points to the increasing dominance of the King and his court over the nobility. In Spain itself the old system of *primus inter pares* coexisted with the predominance of the monarch. Thus in Aragon Ferdinand was addressed as "We who are no better than you declare to you who are no better than us" In Castille, however, the process of Crown control was far more advanced. That Crown, worn by Ferdinand's wife, Isabella, had no intention of allowing a new powerful nobility to arise in the so-called New World glimpsed by Christopher Columbus on the morning of October 12, 1492 at Guanahani in the Bahamas. The Crown, too, would see to it that the Church never asserted its temporal power over the Crown, and the patronato real became the legal mechanism whereby the Spanish Crown controlled appointments to the Church, with due respect to the Popes who had formally granted possession of the western continents - the papal donation to

the Spanish Crown.

The Spaniards whose ships scoured the Caribbean Sea after 1492 came, then, in search of fortune, of status and honour, of *hidalgo* status, ideologically buttressed by the conviction that God was on the side of the conquest. It may be so. What is certain, however, is that they had sufficient gun-power, the manoeuvrability of a cavalry, and a belief in total war to crush a native enemy whose most advanced weapons were spears. The Jamaican Indians threw their spears at Columbus's ships, to no avail.

### **Decline of the Indigenous Population**

During his second voyage to the Indies Columbus mentions thick settlements of Indians on the Jamaican north and south coast. The Dominican friar, Bartolome de las Casas, referred later on to the very dense Indian population of Jamaica, and from all appearances Las Casas obtained this information from people who had visited Jamaica. The recent works of Sherbourne Cooke and Woodrow Borah? have tended to revise upward the Indian populations of the Caribbean and central America suggesting up to one and a half million for Hispaniola - substantial revision upwards from 60,000 to 600,000. Morales Padron suggests 60,000 native Jamaicans, but Morales' figure seems to have been plucked arbitrarily out of his own hat.

We are not in a position to give an accurate figure either. It is interesting to note, however, that when in 1511, Indians were being shared out among the Spaniards in *repartimiento*, that the Crown received a large number and the Columbus family 1,600 men and his Lieutenant another 1,600. These figures must surely correspond to the perception of the Spanish colonists of the size of the Indian population. There are unfortunately no figures on how many Indians were granted to less deserving Spaniards, and no figures either on how many Spaniards were in Jamaica. It is worth noting too that this distribution of Indians took place fourteen years after Columbus's first entry into the island, and we can assume that the decline of the population had begun long before 1511.

By the end of the sixteenth century most of the Indian population had died. There are three major explanations for the rapid decline of the populations of the Americas. The first one was suggested by Bartolome de las Casas - that the system was primarily responsible. Las Casas's view was that the *encomienda* imposed such a harsh labour regime on the Indians that they were unable to survive it. (It has been argued that the European labour system imposed the capitalist category of labour organisation on a system that had been primarily communal). The fact is that the Spanish authorities in Jamaica were instructed to intensify production in Jamaica in order to meet the needs of the *conquistadores* on their way to the mainland - bred supplies, cattle or whatever the island could provide. Jamaica, strategically placed vis-a-vis the Mainland, was ideal

for the performance of that function. The island served as a supply base for Castillo del Oro, sent material assistance to Pedrarias on the Isthmus, and to Vasco Nunez de Balboa. We know that the governor of Jamaica sent to Balboa cassava bread, pork, beef and other supplies, which incidentally Balboa never paid for. The King recommended that Jamaicans sign up with Gil Gonzalez Davila for the exploration of the South Sea, since the Jamaicans were already acclimatized. Garay one of Jamaica's first governors eventually joined Heran Cortes. On June 26, 1523, Pedro de Garay left Jamaica at the head of an expedition for the Mainland. (Morales, 70-5), Las Casas does have a point, though the labour regime was not entirely responsible for the destruction of the Indian population.

A second factor was the export of Jamaican Indians to Cuba to fill the gap left by the declining Indian population in that island. Again, there are no specific statistics. A third possibility is war between the Indians and Spaniards. It is clear that many Indians fled to the less accessible mountains away from the Spaniards. There is one reference to "war" but no details are given. We do know that the Spanish colonists did resort to brutal tactics to keep the Indian population in subjection. When the Crown despatched Francisco de Garay to Jamaica as Repartidor de Indios, Garay was much struck by the sparsity of the Indian population. In 1515 Pedro de Mazuelo concluded that if Spanish excesses were allowed to continue that the entire Indian population would be erased within two years. "When Diego Columbus's representative tried to distribute the Indians, the Caciques openly resisted, and the Indians began to flee for refuge in the highest mountains. But the liquidation of the leaders was followed by the submission of the rest, who were immediately distributed and used as agricultural labourers." (Morales Padron 260-1). In 1523, one Francisco Garcia Bermejo informed the King that in the first repartimiento of Indians, the Cacique Goayrabo, and all his subjects has been assigned to him; but at the time of writing he had only four or five Indians left." (Morales: 185)

By far the most important cause of Indian mortality was disease. The most fatal of all diseases brought to the New World was small-pox, described by Alfred Crosby as a "disease with seven league boots." (201) The disease appeared in Espanola (Hispaniola) "at the end of 1518 or the beginning of 1519...the malady quickly exterminated a third or half of the Arawacks on Espanola, and almost immediately leaped the straits to Puerto Rico and the other Greater Antilles, accomplishing the same devastation there." (200) And then there was scarlet-fever, measles, influenza, diphtheria, trschoma, whooping cough, chicken pox, bubonic plague, malaria, typhoid fever, cholera, yellow fever, dengue fever, amebic dysentery, and other "helminthic infestations." (Crosby: 198) the susceptibility of the non-immune Arawaks to the new diseases was quickly demonstrated when Columbus "searching for a West Indian commodity that would sell in Europe, sent 550 Amerindian slaves, twelve to thirty-five years of age,

more or less, off across the Atlantic. Two hundred died on the difficult voyage; 350 survived to be put to work in Spain. The majority of these soon were also dead "because the land did not suit them." (Crosby:198)

The affection that the rat has always had for man has never really been shared by man whose abhorrence for the rodent has been intensified by the plagues and the diseases that it carries. Rats, according to Crosby, "shipped as stowaways with the Iberians everywhere they went in America." Quoting Garcilaso de la Vega, "They bred in infinite numbers, overran the land, and destroyed crops and standing plants, such as fruit trees, by gnawing the bark from the ground to the shoots." Afterward they remained in such numbers on the coast "that no cat dare look them in the face." We can assume that the rat performed its function equally efficiently in Jamaica - destroying fruits, and spreading murine typhus.

Las Casas pleaded for the end of the *encomienda*, even for the introduction of African slaves, whom he assumed would be better able to cope with hard labour. The use of African labour, as we have noted was widespread in the Iberian peninsula, and it was natural for las Casas to think in terms of extending African slavery to the Americas. The Africans faced the same demographic catastrophe. African slaves were introduced into Hispaniola from about 1520, and certainly by the mid-sixteenth century Jamaicans were pleading for the introduction of African slaves. The assumption - no African labour, no prosperity, and a King after all could not be wealthy if his subjects were poor.

Spanish Jamaica never did have a large number of African slaves, at least if we compare their numbers with the period after the English conquest when the sugar plantation network fostered the rapid development of the slave trade from Africa. However, the limited number of slaves were essentially the "cornerstone of the economy." (Morales: 266-267) In 1523, the Crown placed an order for 300 African slaves to be sent to Jamaica. A few years later 700 slaves were ordered for the island. In 1534, the Treasurer Pedro de Mazuelo obtained 30 blacks to work his sugar mill on the south coast of the island, close to Spanish Town. they were to be involved with construction of fortifications, cattle-hunting, the manufacture of sugar, clearing of forests, tanning of leather, etc. (Morales: 189) Freed blacks (called "horros" in Jamaica) and mulattoes also manned the cavalry and were an important element in the four militia companies of Villa de la Vega. (Morales: 273-4).

The greatest gifts," declares one historian, "given to the New World by the Spaniards, were the horse and cow." The American environment, it is well known, had few beasts of burden, only the weak alpaca which struggles with anything over 40 pounds in weight. the Arawaks of Jamaica did not even have that. The Europeans, however, also brought pigs, and dogs that bark. The horse and the cow can breed on their own because they are self-reliant. The plains of Jamaica no less than those of Santo

Domingo and no less than the pampas of Argentina provided the conditions for the rapid spread of wild cattle, as usual “turning cellulose - grass, leaves, sprouts - that humans cannot digest into meat, milk, fiber, and leather.” (Crosby: 177) Christopher Columbus carried with him, in 1493, from the Canary Islands cattle which soon populated the grasslands of the West Indian islands, were roaming over Mexico by the 1520s and Peru by the 1530s. The Spanish settlers were often skilled herdsman and cattle-hunters and in Jamaica, cattle-hunting became an important activity providing opportunities for the export of hides, lard, and beef. The cattle were “fast, lean and mean,” (Crosby: 178) perhaps posing a challenge to people who had had a long and hair-raising tradition of bull-fighting.

The Spaniards in Jamaica also delighted in bird-shooting, easily the most cowardly sport, but one which provides to this day in Jamaica a perverse leisure. In the region around St. Thomas, the Spaniards grew the grape-vine and provided themselves, thereby, with a claret wine, which they at least found satisfactory.

The Spaniards ever struggling through jungle and forest, across wild streams, risking their lives against unknown tropical animals, carried with them the cross of Christ and the worship of El Dorado. That vision of El Dorado, the dream in need of desperate fulfilment for the poverty-stricken adventurer from the barren Extremadura, nourished the vigour of the Jamaican Spaniards. The rivers and streams of Espanola had yielded alluvial gold, and why not the little island south of the first Spanish settlement. If Jamaica had gold it remained in the untapped hollows of the island's rocky mountainous soil. The island has yet to yield that secret. Frustrated by the search for gold the Spanish Jamaicans settled for copper and the island's copper river is a pathetic reminder of that search. The absence of gold pushed the Spanish vecinos south toward Mexico and Peru, where the tale of El Dorado appeared to have some basis in the splendid descriptions of the great Aztec and Inca Empires. A hundred years later the British discovered that the island yielded more gold through its sugar plantations and a booming slave trade. The Spaniards introduced probably from the Canary Islands the sugar plant that was destined to shape the economic, social, demographic and political history of Jamaica under British rule. Close to Spanish Town, on the fertile plains of St. Catherine, under Spanish rule, the sugar cane took root.

Not all Spaniards deserted Jamaica. Those who remained embarked upon agriculture and ranching as we have shown above. But the island remained little more than a strategic outpost of the Spanish Empire - an island which was not to be allowed to fall into the hands of Spain's enemies, but a possession whose value was debased by the absence of precious metal.

The Spanish monarchs were strongly opposed to the creation of a strong, powerful nobility in the New World. Every effort had been made to curb their powers within

Spain itself. In the New World, one of the first victims of the determination of the Crown to assert its dominance over all other social or political groups was Christopher Columbus himself. The honours and privileges that Columbus had won, Viceroy, Governor, Admiral of the Ocean Sea, and shares in the wealth to be extracted from the New World, were gradually taken away from him or were rendered more or less meaningless. When Christopher Columbus died in 1506, his son Diego (the second Admiral) sued the Crown in order to enforce the recognition of the rights conceded to his father. "(Morales, 70) Diego was described as "more the heir of the anguishes, toils, and disfavour of his father than of the Estate, honours and preeminences which he had gained with so much sweat and affliction." (70) "His ambition passed on to his wife, Dona Maria de Toledo upon his death in February 1526. In 1527, the Crown declared null and void all previous decisions arising out of the suit, and began "all over again."

The outcome of the Crown-Columbus suit was the concession of the island of Jamaica to the Columbus family, in the capacity of Marquis of Jamaica. The island was given to the Columbus' because "it is small and up to that moment he has not derived any profit since it has no gold, no silver or pearls, or anything but riches from cattle-rearing. It should be conceded to him as his personal property, with the title of Duke or Marquis, but with the King remaining in supreme command. He will not be permitted to fortify it without the King's permission..." As far as the Crown was concerned Jamaica had no economic potential. Only later, when the Crown discovered that the island was wealthy in pimento spice did it show any particular interest in Jamaica as an economic asset worthy of the Crown's full permission.

Morales Padron, Spanish historian of Spanish Jamaica, believe that the decision to grant Jamaica to the Columbus family resulted in the island's failure to become a more important economic asset to the Crown. That view presupposes that had the island remained in Crown hands that there would have been policies designed to increase production in Jamaica. It is possible that Morales was too influenced by what the British did after 1655, and too little influenced by what was happening to the islands of the Spanish Caribbean. In fact, the Jamaican economy evolved under the Columbus dynasty, in precisely the same way that Cuba, Puerto Rico and Espanola developed - an emphasis on ranching, subsistence farming, cattle-hunting, the export of hides. All the islands were underpopulated, all were dependent on a relatively small slave-labour force. There was little commercial contact between Spain and the Caribbean islands, and during the seventeenth century, Spain's economy went into decline. Spain lacked the resources, technical and financial, to develop the Caribbean. The new capitalism was located in Amsterdam and in London, not in Madrid. There is a belief, too, that Jamaica was not properly fortified because the power of the Columbus family to fortify it was curtailed by the Crown. This is only partly true. Firstly because the island did construct fortifications constructed in the other Spanish Caribbean islands were any

more adequate than Jamaica. Not until the eighteenth century was El Morro in Puerto Rico, and major fortifications in Cuba came about with the engineering feats of Juan Bautista Antonelli. In many respects, the affairs of the island were conducted under the auspices of the Crown. The pattern of selection of governors, presentation of Abbots, residencias of retiring governors, and the institutions of government were identical to those established in other areas of the Caribbean. Jamaica's was a minor governorship, responsible for reporting to the Audiencia of Santo Domingo. Governors were sometimes selected by the Columbus family, at other times by the Crown, but obviously nominations made by the Columbus family had to be approved by the Crown. The Columbus's also had the right to present Abbots and other officials of the church, but again the Crown had to approve of these appointments. In the final analysis, the island was truly the Crown's responsibility.

Governor's of Jamaica were generally chosen for a period of six years, but the length of time could be altered according to the Crown's will and pleasure. Governor Melgarejo, for example, ruled for 10 years. Some of Jamaica's Spanish governors were very controversial, and the Spanish citizenry were inclined to accuse them of corruption - especially with respect to trading with Spain's enemies, or using their position to utilise slave labour which was in short supply. Nepotism was one accusation. Melgarejo was accused of taking for himself and his lieutenants "All Negroes or items of merchandise which entered the island. Melgarejo had suggested to the Abbot that Philip II's soul had been condemned.

At the end of the period of governorship all Spanish officials including viceroys, governors, and captains general were subject to a residencia - i.e. an on the spot investigation of the period of office exercised by the incoming governor. The residencia was clearly a useful method for the Crown to exercise control over its officials across the Atlantic. But there was a way for governor's to get around the residencia. Melgarejo, it was alleged, reserved 14,000 pesos with which to bribe the incoming governor. Perhaps the most controversial governor was Francisco Terril 1625-1623. Terril refused to demit office in 1628, and it took four years and troops from Cuba to throw him out of office and out of Jamaica.

We noted earlier that there was a religious militancy underlying the Spanish nation state. The ideology of conquest was thereby linked to conversion of non-Christians; but also to provide religious guidance and offer spiritual support to Spain's citizens across the Atlantic. The Church also provided bureaucrats for Spanish administration in the Empire. In Jamaica ecclesiastical organisation started in 1515 in the form of the Abbacy of Jamaica, subordinated at first to Santo Domingo but later to Cuba. The first Abbots were absentee, and only one, Pedro Martir de Angleria, bestirred himself to do more than to collect the tithes due to the Abbots. Pedro Martir was responsible for financing

the first stone church in Seville, St. Ann, before the Spaniards moved their settlement to the south coast. The church was never completed.

The Jamaican Abbot wore a mitre, carried a pastoral staff and enjoyed episcopal authority... [He wore] a ring, and other pontifical regalia. He was also empowered to nominate a Vicar, to summon a tribunal, and as Superior in a Vacant See, he was entitled to be called Magnus Abbas. As a veritable prelate, he could also, through a consecrated Bishop, confer on his flock all the favours associated with a Bishop's office. But he could not confer or administer confirmation, ordain priests, or consecrate the Holy Oil. (Morales, 108)

Priests and Abbots no doubt carried out their religious functions, a few with considerable zeal, leading in the case of one Abbot to wholesale excommunication. Abbot Mateo de Medina was scandalised by the fact that no efforts had been made by the Spanish proprietors to offer a moral or religious education to their slaves, complaining that the slaves "lived in concubinage without the sacrament of marriage, and lived as though they were men and wife, tending their children and small livestock." The proprietors' response was to complain to Admiral Columbus at the Abbot's interference. Juez de Comision, Juan de Retuerta, tried to place Abot Mateo in a bad light, but only in effect demonstrated the quality of moral life in the island:

"Religion... is not of the highest quality, since with two petitions, with no other justification, and with great ease, marriages are declared null and void. There were some married men who had been married to another woman, who was still alive and married to another man by whom she had had several children. Every day the Church Bells rang out while the Abbot with little or no cause and without any kind of trial, excommunicated citizens. With the same ease, he invoked the relevant Bull to revoke the decision, so that excommunication was no longer feared or treated with respect. Governor Alonso de Miranda lived in concubinage with a mulatto woman "to look after him", and he claimed "his celibate life."

The same Abbot Don Mateo excommunicated a governor, who was also an officer

of the Inquisition, an example of the rivalry between the secular and the religious authorities. The end result was the murder of the excommunicated governor.

So Spanish Jamaica evolved at the periphery of the Spanish Empire, occasionally trading illegally with the Dutch, French and English adjusting to a life in isolation from the Spanish metropolis. The economy continued to rest on the small slave labour force. Social life reflected the life of people living on a frontier. In 1655 Spanish Jamaica began its final chapter when Oliver Cromwell's 9,000 men disembarked to face a mere 1,500 Jamaicans able to bear arms. Much of the militia of the Spaniards had black and coloured membership. But the English conquest was not to be completed for another 10 years, for the Spanish governor Isasi together with the freed slaves - the cimarrones - put up a guerrilla resistance to the English invaders. The battle was only lost when the blacks deserted to the English side. Ysasi and his men fled to Cuba.

“In all there must have been about 100 Spanish defenders, in addition to the negroes who barricaded themselves behind palisades which they built. It was the decision or course of action taken by the negroes that was to determine the final outcome. For the time being they were loyal to the Spaniards. The extent of their loyalty was demonstrated in the speed with which they hanged any Englishman who came to offer them liberty in exchange for defection. the unpredictable nature of the negro resistance, however, made the Spanish position insecure. Furthermore, some Spaniards were of the view that negro action far from being honourable for the Spanish camp was a blot on Spanish arms.”  
(Morales, 272)

What blacks felt about this “blot” will never be known. What we do know is that “blot” or no, the Spaniards gave up the struggle once they switched sides to the English. In 1670 Spain formally ceded Jamaica to the English, by the treaty of Madrid. The acquisition of Jamaica was one further step in the build up of British power in the Caribbean. Jamaica was now added to Barbados, St. Kitts, Antigua, Nevis, under British control from the 1620s. More important is that the economic system based upon the slave plantation system that the British had tried and tested in the smaller islands was now to be applied to the much larger Jamaica. The former Spanish colony became a spring board for commercial penetration of the Spanish Empire, for the transshipment of slaves to the Empire and consequently a source of gold for British banks.

For most Jamaicans the Spanish period in our history is hardly even a memory, as we

suggested a the beginning. And for most of us history begins in 1655. There was no transfer of institutions from the Spanish to the English period, except for the maroons, and the institution of slavery. The true link between the Spanish and the English period is the spread of Europe over the globe, the intense rise of capitalism, and the sacking of the world outside Europe, the Atlantic Economy. The struggle between Spain and England notwithstanding, both nations were responsible for beginning the establishment of the modern world as we understood it. The geo-political significance of Jamaica was from than understood.

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