

An Island of Discontent

THE REMOVAL of the Sugar Tariff in 1846¹ drastically hit the Jamaican economy at a time when it could least afford it. With India and Africa proffering a more lucrative future, the island was relegated to a political backwater.² The Home Government was beset with problems on its doorstep, without having to concern itself with an island whose ills it had supposedly cured in 1838. The activities of the Chartists, campaigns for the repeal of the Corn Law and the potato famine in Ireland, not to mention the revolutionary movements disrupting the peace of Europe, made Jamaica's problems appear inconsequential. Foreign investment was nevertheless of prime importance and necessitated a slow and deliberate withdrawal of British protection of West Indian commodities. Free Trade had won over men who, according to W. L. Burn, had been "professional advocates of emancipation, men who now find in the freest possible commerce a still higher morality": they demanded in consequence the abolition of protected sugar. This changed attitude produced no righteous anger, instead, "complacent optimism".³

As a result of this political neglect, mismanagement and continual plantocratic rule, the island's deep-seated fears and mistrust were kept festering; the native rebellion of 1832 seemed not to have had any lasting effect, save to increase the Assembly's determination to rule just as it pleased. Though slavery was officially ended, it had not relinquished its presence in the internal affairs of state; the old tensions between the British Government and the Assembly continued.⁴ An American journalist, William Sewell, reported his impressions in the *New Yorker* after a visit in 1859: "The people of Jamaica are not cared for; they perish miserably . . . they are not instructed . . . every effort is made to check a spirit of independence . . . Emancipation has not been wholly successful because the experiment has not been wholly tried".⁵

It was inevitable that in the wake of economic decline, there were increasing social problems, rooted in conditions that had not been dealt with either by the British or Jamaican authorities at the time of emancipation. The House of Assembly, for the next twenty years, until 1865, ruled in splendid isolation. Walter Dendy, a Baptist missionary, wrote bitterly in 1849: "Legislation in Jamaica appears almost a mockery".⁶ The labour situation was desperate. Ellis Fray, the missionary at Kettering, reported in 1851: "We are passing through a great commercial and agricultural crisis, and what the end will be is hard for us to divine, but turn wherever you will at *present*, poverty and distress stare you in the face".⁷ Dendy reported in the

following year that "unless some scheme be devised for the resuscitation of agriculture, this part of the island at least will soon be brought to a state of desolation".⁸

An outbreak of cholera during the 1850s added to the island's misery. J. E. Henderson, the Baptist minister at Waldensia, reported that about 200 of his members had died as a result of the disease, while nearly 3,000 succumbed in the district. Percipiently, he also states that many died primarily through malnutrition, which had left them physically incapable of coping with whatever disease might be rampant.⁹ J. M. Phillippo also recalls the sense of despair as he ministered to his people in Spanish Town.¹⁰

Sickness, drought and the lack of food inevitably raised the crime rate. The jails were filled with people convicted for larceny, with summonses for "debt", which disclosed "an amount of pecuniary difficulty never before experienced".¹¹ There is, however, evidence to suggest that some of the charges of larceny, vagrancy and even starvation were exaggerated. David East, Principal of Calabar College, set out in 1853 on a personal investigation to assess the extent of the existing problems. His findings suggest that at least within many of the villages in the Mountain Settlements the people were able to maintain themselves above the starvation level.¹² In the following year, 1854, the Stipendiary Magistrate for St. Thomas-in-the-Vale acknowledged the importance of the Free Village system for the island during this period, but the Free Villages could not shoulder the whole island and its burdens; the drought which occurred at this point underlined the Magistrate's warning in dramatic fashion.¹³

The picture nevertheless was not all gloom. Dr. E. B. Underhill, Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, visiting the island in 1859, reported that the prospects "are improving".¹⁴ Discussing the reasons for the religious revival in Jamaica in 1860-1861, Professor D. G. Hall points to its beginnings in the area of Manchester, a relatively prosperous district of small settlements away from the plantation environment.¹⁵ Similarly, the area surveyed by David East was comprised of small settlements, suggesting that the full force of the social and economic decline fell upon the plantation districts. A report of one of Underhill's meetings held in Spanish Town on 14th May, 1865¹⁶ illustrates this point, for it was stated that about 1,900 out of a population of 3,124 were unemployed; all were suffering from inflation and excessive taxation.¹⁷

Politically the Negro was free, though still in economic bondage to a plantocratic oligarchy. In some instances the Negro and the Coloured, especially tradesmen who had taken advantage of the new village situation, were financially better off than many in the white community, but they were still second-class citizens. Inadequate understanding of the people's needs served to prevent the British Government from taking any remedial action, whilst for their part, the ex-slave and his family experienced depths of poverty which underlined the fact that freedom rightly understood demanded more than mere words in an Act of Parliament. Freedom was concerned with a new understanding

and a new experience of what it was to be a human being. It demanded mutual trust and respect between the home Government and the people of a distant colony, which at this time was almost impossible.

If society in general endured a sense of depression, the Church felt it even more deeply. The Baptists experienced an upsurge of discontent, which seemed to have developed rapidly from the untimely death of two of their most able leaders, William Knibb and Thomas Burchell¹⁸; discontent was not only felt at the local level, but also strained relationships with the Baptist Missionary Committee in London. Since 1843 the Baptists in Jamaica had been autonomous, with the Home Committee in a supporting role, providing money and missionaries.¹⁹ The friction between Knibb and the Committee is well known; not so widely recognised is the fact that Burchell, as early as 1826, felt the Committee to be unsympathetic and was prepared to propose that they relinquished their management of the Mission in Jamaica.²⁰ Yet in fairness it should be said that without the Committee's continued help and support, even after 1843, the work in Jamaica would have been extremely difficult, to say the least. Tensions and personality clashes, however, continued. The Churches proclaimed their independence so loudly, partly on the expectation that their popularity amongst the Negroes immediately after emancipation would enable them to be completely self-supporting. The economic decline which followed hard on 1843 (when the Churches opted to become autonomous, no longer financially dependent on the B.M.S.) revealed the lack of adequate preparation for so complete an exercise in self-sufficiency on the part of the Church. By 1845 the Jamaican Baptists were compelled to ask the Society for a substantial grant to enable them to redeem outstanding debts on church and manse buildings amounting to some £18,000.²¹ Almost all of Henderson's letters speak of debt, while B. Millard of St. Ann's wrote "debts are a drag", listing the total debts of the missionaries as between £7,000 and £7,500.²²

Some measure of blame, however, must lie with the Home Committee who, though in the difficult position of being responsible for personnel and property on the island, were no longer responsible for the developing structure of the Church. Nevertheless, they were still looked to as a policy-making body. Unfortunately, the Committee seemed devoid of any policy whatsoever concerning Jamaica; this no doubt highlighted a weakness of the congregational principle.²³ The lack of clarification of the real relationship between the Society and the Jamaican Churches resulted in suspicion and misunderstanding. Strained relationships brought bitter comment. Henderson, one of the Society's most persistent critics, felt ostracized; ten years later, in 1857, he wrote: "I sometimes wish I had as many friends at Moorgate Street as some others".²⁴ In 1850 he, along with three other ministers in the Western Union, signed a letter of resignation, suggesting that they had no confidence in the Home Committee.²⁵ Dendy was no less critical. Writing to Underhill he sarcastically observes that he does "not expect that any letter from me will have any effect at Moorgate

Street, seeing I am but a plain man not having been brought up in the School of the Prophets . . ." ²⁶

Finance was one of the main irritants inflaming a delicate situation. The Home Committee's own financial difficulties exacerbated the Jamaican problem of debt incurred during the period of expansion just after emancipation. Consequently, the Society prevaricated over the question of the Widows' and Orphans' Fund, causing not a few of the missionaries to suffer some hardship. Dendy's correspondence ²⁷ suggests that the Fund derived most of its capital from compulsory contributions, both from churches and missionaries. During a visit from Dr. Joseph Angus and C. M. Birrell of Liverpool in 1846, new proposals for the Fund were made, to no avail. The actual decision to dissolve the Fund had already been taken with missionaries Burchell, Knibb, Dendy, Thomas Abbott and David Day appointed to carry out the necessary arrangements. By 1851 Knibb and Burchell were dead, and Abbott and Day were no longer in Jamaica, leaving only Dendy to face the endless stream of requests for repayment. Samuel Oughton, perhaps the most conservative of the missionaries, threatened legal action. With hindsight we can appreciate the Society's reluctance to bring the affair to a speedy conclusion and one can understand Dendy's impatience, for he was being pressed hard by his colleagues; his own request that the money owing him be transferred into an insurance policy—costing less than the amount owing—was also rejected. There appeared in the *Missionary Herald*, May 1852 ²⁸ a note saying that all outstanding accounts had been settled. This was inaccurate, for in 1855 Dendy was still asking for his money. ²⁹ Little wonder he felt himself out of favour with the London Committee; it says much for his loyalty that he did not desert either the Society or his work in Jamaica.

Tensions between London and Jamaica were paralleled in the local Church, accounted for partly by the period of depression and partly by the increasing sense of independence amongst the people as a whole. Phillippo was one of the first to suffer from this growing frustration. During a period of absence in England in 1844 his assistant Dowson gathered around him a strong following and planned to oust Phillippo and take over the premises. Phillippo was forced to take legal action which dragged on for seven years, ending in his favour, but also in the establishment of another Church in Spanish Town. ³⁰

During the events of the 1840s the town of Montego Bay illustrated the growing desire for power amongst the Negro peasantry within the Baptist community. During an interregnum at the Baptist Church a clash of personalities shook the fellowship. On the one side there was S. J. Vaughan, who claimed to be the senior deacon, while the opposition came from a fellow deacon, Thomas Williams. ³¹ The Church was divided into two distinct factions. The parties were bitterly opposed and opened separate banking accounts to safeguard their own collections. The Vaughan faction attempted to install its own minister, and Dendy found himself in an unenviable position as mediator. He called a meeting of both parties on 28th-29th August 1848,

not without some procedural difficulties: Williams wanted the conference to be conducted as an Open Church Meeting, Vaughan objected on the grounds that it might exacerbate the existing mistrust. A compromise was found through a meeting of representatives from each party. A relative victory for Dendy's diplomacy was scored over the matter of the finances; the fundamental rift was, however, only temporarily patched up. In 1849 the two parties accepted James Reid of Clarendon as minister. However, in March, Dendy reported trouble again, suggesting that the Western Union had acted officiously over the question of property owned by the Church. This resulted in the Church's withdrawal from the Union. He also hinted that there were those in the Union who not only favoured a second Church in Montego Bay, but were prepared to assist in its establishment.³² By April over 200 members seceded, indicating that the original rift had not been healed, as well as dissatisfaction with the Western Union.³³ Before blaming the Negroes' attempt to seize power, we ought to bear in mind that in England at that time Nonconformity was going through a period of "dissension and decline".³⁴ Sheer frustration caused Dendy to lay much of the blame for Jamaican unrest upon a lack of concern in the English Churches.³⁵ Henderson became minister of the Calvary Church in Market Street and attempted to work in harmony with Reid, who would not co-operate³⁶; thus 700 of his members left to join Henderson.³⁷

It was inevitable that with the lack of strong leadership and shortage of money, together with the fact that second and third generation freed Negroes did not feel any sense of dependency upon or obligation to the missionaries, a general exodus from Churches throughout the island should have taken place, a process each denomination in turn suffered. There was, however, one brief period of relief, namely, an outbreak of Revival in 1860. For the Churches it was a ray of hope, for the plantocracy it suggested growing unrest and so became a contributing factor towards the Morant Bay tragedy in 1865. It was but a brief experience and did little to stop the flood-tide of depression and discontent. The Church acted as a catalyst for social justice and social development³⁸ and, as such, inevitably took the blame for the events of 1865. A study of the tragedy shows that the roots are to be found deeply embedded in the slave system which was created by the "civilised" communities of the Western world and which acts of emancipation and abolition could not blot out at the stroke of the legislator's pen.³⁹

NOTES

¹ E. L. Woodward, *The Age of Reform, 1815-70*, 2nd edn. (London, 1962), 373.

² *Ibid.*, 374.

³ W. L. Burn, *The Age of Equipoise* (London, 1964), 70, 84-7.

⁴ D. G. Hall, *Free Jamaica* (New York, 1959), 81-120.

⁵ W. G. Sewell, *The Ordeal of Free Labour in the British West Indies* (London, 1861), 177-9.

⁶ Dendy, 16 Jan. 1849. West India Reference Library, Kingston. All letters from this source will hereafter be referred to by sender's name and date. A set of 143 letters has been deposited in the Bristol Baptist College Library.

⁷ Fray, 9 Dec. 1851. Fray, a native of Jamaica, was a product of Calabar College and son-in-law of Knibb. See also *Baptist Magazine* (1866), 762.

⁸ Dendy, 4 Nov. 1852.

⁹ Henderson, 4 March 1851.

¹⁰ E. B. Underhill, *The Life of the Rev. James Mursell Phillippo* (London, 1881), 257.

¹¹ *Facts and Documents relating to the Alleged Rebellion in Jamaica and the measure of Repression. Including Notes of the Trial of Mr. Gordon* (Jamaica Papers no. 1, London, 1866).

¹² *Baptist Magazine* (1853), 479-80.

¹³ Cited F. R. Augier and S. C. Gordon, *Sources of West Indian History* (London, 1962), 227-8.

¹⁴ E. B. Underhill, *The West Indies: their Social and Religious Condition* (London, 1862), 183.

¹⁵ Hall, *Free Jamaica*, 237.

¹⁶ The Underhill meetings were the result of his conveying to the British Government the reports of Baptist missionaries in Jamaica. Governor Eyre and the Jamaica Assembly strongly denied the implications that all was not well, and meetings were held throughout the island. See E. B. Underhill, *The Tragedy of Morant Bay* (London, 1895).

¹⁷ Underhill, *Phillippo*, 327. *Facts and Documents*, 6.

¹⁸ Knibb died 1845. Burchell died 1846.

¹⁹ G. A. Catherall, "Thomas Burchell, Gentle Rebel", *Baptist Quarterly*, XXI (1966), 349-63.

²⁰ W. Burchell, *Memoirs of Thomas Burchell* (London, 1849), 106.

²¹ Underhill, *Phillippo*, 246. J. W. Hinton, *Memoir of William Knibb*, London, 1847), 106.

²² Millard, 23 March 1850.

²³ See J. W. Kilpatrick, "Protestant Missions in Jamaica" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Edinburgh, 1944). D. Ryall, "The Organisation of Missionary Societies and Recruitment in Britain, etc." (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, London, 1959), where it is argued that the congregational principle is not suitable for the missionary situation.

²⁴ Henderson, 3 April 1857.

²⁵ Henderson, 24 Oct. 1850 and 10 Nov. 1850 in which he writes "the positive refusal of the Committee to help in any way compels me to abandon the work".

²⁶ Dendy, 8 Sept. 1851.

²⁷ Dendy, 5 March 1850, 22 Sept., 21 Oct. 1851, 29 April 1852. 21 July 1853, 15 Feb., 15 May 1854, 21 Feb. 1855.

²⁸ *Baptist Magazine* (1853), 319.

²⁹ Dendy, 21 Feb. 1855, in which he accuses the Society of little interest because the Jamaican Church has "no prospect of an abundant harvest".

³⁰ Underhill, *Phillippo*, 226-36. United in 1946 by the Rev. Carter Henry.

³¹ Two letters from the Williams' faction, 1848; Church letter from the Vaughan faction, 1849; Report of meeting at Montego Bay, 1848; all in West India Reference Library, Kingston.

³² Dendy, 18 March, 29 April 1849.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ E. Halevy, *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century*, IV. *Victorian Years, 1841-95* (London, 1961), 377.

³⁵ Dendy, 9 April 1849.

³⁶ Henderson, 12 July 1856.

³⁷ Henderson, 21 Oct. 1856.

³⁸ There were other areas in which the Church sought to bring sanity: education; the Orphans Bill, 1851; their contribution in spite of difficulties suggests an acute grasp of the situation and possible solutions.

³⁰ For the Morant Bay tragedy see Underhill, *Tragedy of Morant Bay*. W. L. Mathieson, *The Sugar Colonies and Governor Eyre* (London, 1936). S. Olivier, *The Myth of Governor Eyre* (London, 1933). B. Semmel, *The Governor Eyre Controversy* (London, 1962).

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The University in Society. Edited by Lawrence Stone. Vol. I. *Oxford and Cambridge from the 14th to the early 19th Century*; Vol. II *Europe, Scotland and the United States from the 16th to the 20th Century*. London: Oxford University Press, 1975. Pp. 642. £9.50.

These two handsomely produced volumes are not only informative: it seems likely that they will provoke both lively discussion and considerable new research. Probably the first volume will be of greatest immediate interest to readers of the *Baptist Quarterly*. Professor Stone's own discussion of the size and composition of the Oxford student body 1580-1909 shows that the two great eras of expansion during this period were from the 1580s to the 1660s and then from the 1860s onwards. Curiously, while he mentions the readmission of Dissenters to Oxford in the 19th Century he does not appear to have speculated about the possible links between the decline of student numbers and scholarship at Oxford whilst Dissenters were excluded and their academies flourished. Oxford gets the lion's share of attention in this volume but the essay by Victor Morgan on "Cambridge University and 'the Country' 1560-1640" has important implications for the development of Puritanism. As the writer explores and expounds the intricate network of relationships between the colleges and their hinterland in English society he demonstrates one of the reasons why Puritan opinions spread so widely among the gentry and clergy of his period from Cambridge and, probably, if to a lesser degree, from Oxford.

Volume II covers a wider field with articles dealing with universities in Castile, Edinburgh, Germany and the U.S.A. across four centuries. The three dealing with the U.S.A. are perhaps of widest interest to those concerned with modern educational institutions in the English-speaking world. In one the almost scandalous degree in which students were left to educate themselves in early 19th Century America is sketched; in another the development of professional economists is indicated and, in the third, the impact of earnest New England teachers, for good and ill, upon the education of negro Freedmen after the Civil War is assessed.

Anyone who is interested in the history or the future of higher education will find a great deal of fascinating and provoking reading in these two volumes quite apart from the specialist interests which the present reviewer has found illuminated.

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