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Depression riots and the calling of the 1897 West India Royal Commission

Questions why the West India Royal Commission of 1897 was considered necessary when serious distress already existed in the 1880s. Author argues that riots caught the government's attention much more readily than statistical data. Even minor disturbances could have distracted London from its preoccupation with the newer, more important parts of the Empire.

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DEPRESSION RIOTS AND THE CALLING OF THE 1897
WEST INDIA ROYAL COMMISSION

Within the vastness of primary archival material that the British generated in describing, measuring, and administering their Caribbean colonies, few documents are so useful as those associated with Royal Commissions of Inquiry. The commissions themselves, of course, were aperiodic, problem-oriented phenomena, and they provided particularly important documentary records of the region in the period immediately prior to and following emancipation. Especially in the mid- to late-nineteenth century in the British Caribbean, when planters and freedmen were coming to grips with new social and economic arrangements in an environment clouded with old animosities, a number of commissions dealt with such issues as sugar cane production, labor immigration, financial issues, and social disturbances (Williams 1970:535-37). Commissioners were usually, though not always, sent from Britain to assess local problems. These problems or issues, further, were usually confined to a particular event, theme, or island, although the commissions on rare occasion were asked to survey the entire region. Since these commissions addressed specific local issues in which points of view conflicted, the records of their findings, spiced with often candid testimonies, provide windows into the region's past.¹

Royal Commissions of Inquiry also presented metropolitan and, in some ways, cross-cultural perspectives on colonial issues. The heyday of the royal commissions dealing with the British Caribbean coincided with what has been called "The Great Era" of the royal commissions in general, most of which dealt with nineteenth-century social and industrial problems in the British Isles (Clokier and Robinson 1969:54-79). Deriving their formal

authority directly from the Crown, the commissions actually were appointed by ministers whose parties possessed a majority in the House of Commons. The commissions were thus part of, but, at the same time, apart from the formal British political structure because they were charged with assessing specific issues and often granted the latitude to seek answers outside normal government channels. Commissions dealt with problems that often were too immediate, complex, technical, or delicate to be trusted to normal government routine. Their recommendations, though lacking legal authority, usually carried extraordinary weight, and many specific events in British colonial history may be traced to commissions' recommendations. Since Britain's nineteenth-century commissions dealt with both domestic and colonial issues, it was inevitable that commissioners compared social and economic issues across different regions and different cultures. Colonial historians often interpret the calling of a royal commission as a bureaucratic approach to crisis management, and they are familiar with the kind of testimony in commission proceedings whereby a colonial official compares events in, say, British Guiana with those in Ceylon or the Transvaal.

The capstone of the British Caribbean's nineteenth-century era of royal commissions – and a benchmark on which several twentieth-century commissions were based – was the momentous West India Royal Commission of 1897, the first comprehensive, region-wide commission since 1842. Appointed in December, 1896, by the British Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, the four-man commission was charged with investigating the local results of the severe economic depression in the late-nineteenth century British Caribbean. The depression had created widespread losses in sugar revenue, thereby leading to the lowering of wages and even the abandonment of some sugar cane estates, all of which created “distress among the labouring populations” and other dire circumstances. The members of the commission conducted background hearings in London during the first week of 1897 and then sailed for the Caribbean from Southampton on January 13. In the next three months the commission visited British Guiana, nearly every British possession in the arc of the Lesser Antilles, and also Jamaica. During these visits they amassed a wealth of written information from local officials and planters, and they also collected remarkably candid testimonial evidence from representatives of local working classes. During their three months in the British Caribbean they held “forty-five formal meetings to collect oral evidence, and examined three hundred and eighty witnesses of all classes and occupations” (*Report* 1897:iii, 1).

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the 1897 commission for the British West Indian region as a whole. Among its final conclusions, the commission unanimously recommended five remedial measures to

alleviate the distress in the British Caribbean: 1) “the settlement of the labouring population on small plots of land as peasant proprietors”; 2) establishing minor agricultural industries and the improvement of the system of cultivation; 3) improving inter-island communications; 4) encouraging a fruit trade with New York and, eventually, London; and 5) obtaining a loan from the Imperial Exchequer for the establishment of central cane-milling factories in Barbados (*Report* 1897:70). The first of their five recommendations – the one proposing an independent landed peasantry – was by far the most important for the region as a whole because it laid the groundwork for the subsequent breaking up of large estates in several islands. The commission’s recommendations thus marked, in many ways, a socioeconomic watershed for the eastern Caribbean; writing in 1947, a half-century after the commission, C.Y. Shepherd, the Carnegie Professor of Economics at the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in Trinidad, asserted that “[t]he report of the 1897 Commission may be regarded as the Magna Charta of the West Indian peasant” (Shepherd 1947:63).

Like all of the major Royal Commissions of Enquiry, the 1897 West India commission was called for a number of reasons, and it would be pointless to seek a single cause for it. The formal reason for the commission, “to inquire into the present condition and future prospects of the sugar-growing Colonies of the West Indies, and to suggest such measures,” etc. (*Report* 1897:v) was of course articulated in ponderous Victorian prose as a preamble to the final written report. But terrible, economically depressed conditions already had existed in the region for over a decade. Why, then, did it take so long for an official commission to be formed, and thereby acknowledge fully the serious distress in the British Caribbean in the late-nineteenth century, when officials in the Colonial Office in London for years had daily perused case after case of depression-induced misery sent from the islands? Put another way, if the commission was considered unnecessary in the mid-1880s when the depression became obvious, why was it convened at all?

There is, of course, no simple answer, but it seems more than coincidental that the number of civil disturbances in the region was growing during the depression years, riots and protests that apparently caught London’s attention much more readily than did malnutrition data. And some of the most serious disturbances during the period, major sugar workers’ riots in St. Kitts and British Guiana in 1896, must have gone far in pushing British officials into taking some kind of action. Within the context of London’s overall colonial strategy – by this time being played out on a truly global scale – the West Indian labor riots were minor nuisances. But if these disturbances continued and escalated, they could have distracted the Colonial Office from its preoccupation with the newer, larger, and richer parts of the

empire. It therefore seems more than likely that the riots helped greatly in precipitating the decision to call the 1897 commission. And since the commission itself led to momentous changes in the region, it seems reasonable to suggest that British West Indian working class resistance, in the form of riots and disturbances and within the context of the limits imposed by British colonial policy, helped create major material changes in the region. This suggestion, in turn, is entirely consistent with the general acknowledgement that Caribbean resistance is not simply an academic slogan intended to romanticize the plight of the region's oppressed peoples, but that it has represented, among many other things, a means by which Caribbean peoples have bettered themselves.

THE SUGAR BOUNTY DEPRESSION OF THE LATE-NINETEENTH CENTURY

The economic distress in the British Caribbean had not occurred overnight; it was obvious to anyone who cared to notice that, by the late 1800s, the colonies of the British Caribbean were anachronisms of an earlier empire. Slave emancipation in the 1830s, followed by the rescinding of preferential sugar prices on the London market a decade later, had reduced planters' profits. Worse, the relic infrastructures that had evolved under earlier social and economic conditions were still in place in the smaller islands of the British Caribbean in the late nineteenth century. Small-island size, a geographical characteristic that had afforded ready access for all local planters to port facilities in the days of sailing ships, was now a hindrance in light of the availability of huge tracts of virgin tropical soils elsewhere. Active windmills, which still dominated the late nineteenth-century landscapes of some of the "old islands" such as Antigua, St. Kitts, and Barbados were no match for the steam-driven cane factories that had revolutionized cane sugar production in other tropical areas.

It was difficult enough to compete with modern sugar production in Brazil, Natal, Mauritius, Java, and Fiji, but British Caribbean producers needed to look no farther than the Greater Antilles for examples of sugar success that came from combining modern technology and new lands. Correspondence and commentary from the British Caribbean in the late 1800s were filled with references to the ways in which American capital had transformed the Cuban sugar industry. The sophisticated techniques of producing, storing, and shipping Cuban sugar far outpaced the same activities in the British Caribbean (Moreno Fraginals 1985). But comparative production volumes marked the real differences. In 1815 Cuban sugar exports had been only half those of Jamaica; by 1894 Cuba produced fifty times the sugar

cane grown in Jamaica and four times that grown in the combined territories of the British Caribbean (Williams 1970:366-67)!

To be sure, not all techniques or production zones in British Caribbean sugar cane production had remained ossified. Especially in the larger, newer southern colonies of Trinidad and British Guiana, modern milling techniques and vacuum boiling procedures were paired with new lands to produce a higher quantity and quality of raw sugar than in the older, smaller colonies farther north. And it was to these new places and Jamaica that the great majority of indentured laborers taken from India to the British Caribbean had been brought to satisfy late-nineteenth century labor needs. Black workers from Barbados and some of the other small islands to the north also had emigrated to the south – both seasonally and permanently – attracted by higher wages than they could earn by staying at home (Adamson 1972:41-46). But no amount of internal reorientation of the human geography of British Caribbean sugar production could reorient the trajectory of the global economy. British industrial capitalism now created massive manufacturing surpluses that required an open, global market; the economies of the tiny, sheltered Caribbean sugar islands had, very simply, evolved in another era.

It was not, however, competition from other tropical areas that represented the immediate cause of the late-nineteenth century depression in the British Caribbean but agricultural developments in Europe itself. Beet sugar cultivated in Europe and then also in the United States had, since early in the nineteenth century, made steady inroads on global cane sugar production and passed it early in the 1880s (Galloway 1989:132). European beet sugar's success, moreover, recently had been invigorated by political, not necessarily agro-scientific, inputs. Continental European governments had introduced a complex system of payments to their local beet sugar refiners which were refunds of internal excise taxes for exported beet sugar; the refunds were based on conventional sugar extraction standards, so refiners were encouraged to improve their techniques to receive higher refunds ("bounties") for the greatest amount of sugar that could be produced from a given weight of beet (*Report* 1897:139-49). Encouraged to greater production by these incentives, European – mainly German – sugar producers dumped a massive quantity of beet sugar on the open London market early in 1884, driving down sugar's price there from 19 shillings per hundred pounds to 13. Thus began the devastating "bounty depression" in the Commonwealth Caribbean where sugar prices did not reach 1883 levels again until World War I (Deerr 1950, II:531).

British Caribbean planters condemned London's free-trade policies as betrayals to faithful colonial subjects, and they submitted an endless series

of broadsides, petitions, and memoranda that reflected these sentiments that were articulated at planters' meetings in the islands. The pressure to maintain free-trade in the London sugar market, however, was intense and not simply a government capitulation to British industry. British working classes, for example, given lower sugar prices, now enjoyed a higher percentage of sweets and jam – items formerly considered luxuries – in their diets, and the local confectionery trades thereby lobbied effectively for free-trade (Hobsbawm 1968: 162-63). In the Caribbean, planters' already-thin profits were thereby reduced. As the financial outlook in the region darkened, some of the oldest local merchant houses failed, business concerns that traditionally had provided credit to the sugar cane planters and had represented the financial underpinnings for insular sugar cane industries (*Report* 1897:24).

But the truly grim results of the bounty depression were felt most keenly, of course, among the region's working peoples. In the larger territories – Jamaica with bananas, Trinidad with cacao and asphalt, British Guiana with rice and forest industries, Belize with timber – there were alternatives to sugar cane, although all of these territories except Belize also had sizeable populations to sustain, and alternative livelihood pursuits could not absorb the unemployed. The depression conditions hit hardest in the small places most dependent on sugar, such as Antigua, Barbados, St. Kitts, and St. Vincent. From these islands and all of the others came reports by the hundreds in which local administrators seem to have vied with one another to portray their particular islands' conditions in as depressing a manner as possible. Planters had lowered wages everywhere and had reduced sugar cane acreage, providing even less work than usual for the islands' laborers. Villagers' meager savings were dried up almost immediately. Small livestock and fowls were sold back and forth and eaten. Reduced wages meant less cash on hand to buy imported flour and salted fish, so malnutrition was rampant. Disease then became more prevalent than usual. Men sought wage work outside their home villages by going to the capital towns, only to learn that little work was available anywhere on their home island. Inter-island movements to seek wage labor elsewhere, a livelihood strategy that had been carried out since emancipation, also was less effective than usual because the depression conditions affected conventional migration destinations.

It is hardly surprising that individuals among local working peoples grumbled and complained. Their wage labor provided them a bare subsistence in the best of times, and they were fully aware that local planters controlled local resources, thereby inhibiting laborers in many of the islands, for example, from extending subsistence agriculture beyond their tiny garden plots.

Island officials and also those in the London Colonial Office monitored these complaints, bearing in mind that troubles were most likely to emerge where pent-up workforces were hit hardest by depression. In 1886 in Barbados, for instance, Chief Justice Conrad Reeves endorsed a law that provided financial backing for agricultural loans by the island's treasury, citing the necessity for local agricultural wages to offset his worry "that the colony was steadfastly drifting towards a crisis." In considering his request, London officials acknowledged what could happen in Barbados:

We may admit that there is a danger of a good many estates going out of cultivation; and when that happens in Barbados, the too large working population, which in the best times does not get continuous employment even at a very low wage, is reduced to starvation-incendiary fires become numerous, and there is a rising which the troops can with difficulty put down.²

Another example, among the dozens involving expected or threatened trouble in the wake of depression-induced misery, came from St. Vincent in 1896, and it provided explicit links between these troubles and land hunger, the issue eventually considered at length by the 1897 commission. A letter from S.L. Thornton, the Attorney General of St. Vincent, summarized the local land situation, discussing specifically the fertile plantation lands on St. Vincent's Windward coast that some local planters had threatened to take out of production owing to low cane prices; even if they planted no cane, the planters planned to continue to prohibit the use of these lands by nearby black villagers. Thornton pointed out that many local laborers had responded by emigrating, and he suggested how better interior roads might improve prospects for subsistence agriculture for black villagers. But London officials took particular note of Thornton's prediction of what probably would occur in the neighborhood if planters let the lands lie fallow. It would lead, according to Thornton, to "disturbances on the part of the unemployed, particularly in the Windward District. There is a police force of about 50 in the Colony, which is not much to be relied on to prevent or suppress disorder."³

THE VIEW FROM THE COLONIAL OFFICE

It was not as if 1897 was an otherwise uneventful year for Britain and the British Empire. Public celebrations and imperial pageantry associated with Victoria's diamond jubilee accented London's society and decorated its parks and gardens, as well as those throughout Britain. Beyond the British Isles, the expansion of the empire involved thousands of British officials and

soldiers and provided sensational reading for those who had stayed behind. Tensions between the British and Boers in southern Africa were escalating and would explode into an all-out war by 1899. The northwest frontier in India, particularly the unrest among the Pathans, also required the vigilance of the British army. Given these and other preoccupations, it seems extraordinary that in 1897 the Colonial Office would have sponsored a full-blown Royal Commission to deal with the West Indies, a region that the Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain (who had assumed the office in 1895) would describe soon thereafter as the "Empire's darkest slum" (Amery 1951, IV:241-42).

The British overseas preoccupation with Africa and India at the turn of the century, furthermore, had required – according to some interpretations – accommodation and even acquiescence to former rivals in several strategic world areas. Under a growing German naval threat, Britain accepted Japanese preeminence in the northwestern Pacific, established harmonious relations with the French in the Mediterranean, North Africa, and Southeast Asia, and resolved former differences with Russia in the Far East. Britain had also accepted, with reluctance, United States arbitration of the boundary dispute between Venezuela and British Guiana in the 1890s as called for in the Monroe Doctrine. And the Spanish-American War of 1898 combined with the U.S. Panama Canal effort begun six years later established undisputed American preeminence throughout most of the Caribbean (Gilpin 1981:194-97).

Yet Britain still controlled a substantial string of colonial Caribbean territories, and these territories' status and eventual dispositions were among the many issues entertained by Colonial Office officials in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Unlike in the former "settler colonies" of Canada and Australia, forms of home rule and local political sovereignty for these Caribbean colonies seemed out of the question. The reason seemed remarkably clear; Colonial Office officials held deep reservations about the abilities of Afro-Caribbean peoples to govern themselves and others. A slight exception was a new constitutional change in Jamaica in 1884 which entered "the largely uncharted field between pure crown colony government and representative government." But such a "liberal constitution" was inappropriate for the region as a whole according to Joseph Chamberlain who, in 1896, explained that even minor elements of self-government were "not really suited to a black population" (Will 1970:11, 232). And even the eventual recommendations of the 1897 Royal Commission, sweeping as they were in the area of economic reforms, "fell silent on issues of political change" (Holt 1992:316).

Influences on the thinking of British Colonial Office officials about their

Caribbean colonies in the late-nineteenth century were many and varied, ranging from personal anecdotes to the reading material they encountered in newspapers, magazines, and the written correspondence they received, endorsed, and generated as part of their jobs. Pronouncements and writings from the Fabian Society, founded in the early 1880s, contrasted sharply with the enduring racist dogma of Thomas Carlyle, suddenly half a century old. Colonial Office officials also read widely the newer, contemplative “development” books such as those by writers like Benjamin Kidd who pronounced the demographic urgency of controlling the tropics. European races, according to Kidd, owed it to mankind to unlock the vast resources of the low latitudes that had heretofore been untapped by the indolent “natives” residing there. But this development process would have to be of a remote, indirect kind, lest Europeans, according to Kidd, become victims to the climatically-induced sloth and physical regression characteristic of long-time inhabitants of the tropics (Kidd 1898).

Kidd’s sentiments about European superiority versus the inferiority of tropical peoples were consistent with a heightened racism that accompanied, and in some ways resulted from, contemporary British adventures in Africa. As the British sought to control large numbers of Africans as political subjects and undifferentiated laborers, it became convenient to classify them as “savage” or “primitive.” And it is unsurprising that these pejoratives spilled over into common parlance about the supposed nature of black West Indians, though some Colonial Office officials consciously resisted these comparisons (Olivier 1971:56). They nevertheless persisted, and much of the writings about and correspondence from the British Caribbean at the time offered innumerable comments that the region’s working poor would – without the benign, progressive, and forward-looking guidance of British colonialism – revert to uncivilized “African” forms of human behavior. A guidebook produced in 1893, as only one example among many, predicted the likely result of what would happen if blacks were to take control of Barbados; the island soon would become a settlement of “African hut(s) of wattles and thatch” whose inhabitants “would be found cooking their bananas and yams on the ruins of warehouses” (Stark 1893:195).

These kinds of comparison, moreover, were extended on occasion beyond dark-skinned British subjects to include others oppressed by British imperialism. J. H. Sutton Moxly, the resident chaplain for the British soldiers quartered in Barbados, offered a “scientific” discourse on overall black inferiority in 1886. Consistent with similar racist dogma of the era, Moxly alluded to black mental and moral inferiority as a consequence of the “shape of his head, facial angle, and contour and expression of his features.” But the perceptive Reverend Moxly could see beyond mere physical char-

acteristics when it came to lumping others he disliked into the same despised group as blacks: "Strange as it may seem, there are many points of similarity between the characteristics of the negro and the Irish peasant of the remoter districts of the south and west." And farther on "[...] Quashee, Sambo, and Co. are the [...] Patricks of the torrid zone [...]" (Moxly 1886:140-41, 155, 162). It is difficult to see how these ludicrous comparisons could have been taken seriously by any but a very few, but they were by no means inconsistent with the profoundly distorted image of the Irish peasant made popular by the British press, and doubtless in less formal British parlance, earlier in the nineteenth century (Holt 1992:319).

Although these perverse, mean-spirited comparisons of black Africans and white Irish were probably taken only slightly more seriously late in the 1800s than they would be today, one century later, the indirect influence of the Irish land-use policy on West Indian economic reforms was probably profound. In a recent and illuminating study, Thomas Holt (1992:318-36) points out that the Irish land law of 1870 was the basis for subsequent acts and, more importantly, the establishment of a landed class of smallholders in Ireland; he further suggests that these developments, based in part on Colonial Office perspectives gained from India, influenced similar decisions made in the West Indies and elsewhere and that land reform, without home rule, was a policy embraced by Joseph Chamberlain when he took control of the Colonial Office in 1895.

Holt's suggestions about the overriding influence of Irish developments on Colonial Office thinking about comparable developments elsewhere thus makes sense of the seemingly radical pronouncement by Governor Walter Sendall of the British Windwards in November, 1886, in the aftermath of a minor hurricane that had hit St. Vincent three months earlier. Sendall's comment, echoing a number of cautious yet similar remarks from British Caribbean officials in the 1880s, was an early warning signal as to what the 1897 commissioners, whose perspectives also were influenced by events in Ireland and elsewhere, eventually would recommend. Sendall saw St. Vincent's future lying squarely on "the creation of a class of peasant cultivators" who would realize success by exploiting "that boundless fertile capacity which is inherent in the soil, but which has hitherto been confined within the narrow limits of one or two staple commodities."⁴

Perhaps the single most influential traveler/writer dealing with the British Caribbean during the bounty depression was James Anthony Froude, the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford University and, perhaps more important, Joseph Chamberlain's occasional dinner companion. Froude toured the region in 1886-87 with an eye to assessing the possibility of some sort of parliamentary self-rule for the islands which had become "a

burden upon our resources” and which “were no longer of value to us.” Froude’s travelogue-like narrative of his experiences was sprinkled with gratuitous asides, often cited approvingly by Colonial Office officials, that reinforced the notion that black West Indians were essentially African savages who would backslide irrevocably into primitive ways without (white) Britain’s guidance. The dark peoples of the islands, according to Froude, never had “shaken off the old traditions” and if they ever came to control the region “the state of Hayti stands as a ghastly example of the condition into which they will then inevitably fall [...]” (1888: 4-6, 258).

Froude had contemporary detractors, although apparently none dissuaded Colonial Office thinking from his point of view. John Jacob Thomas, the self-taught Trinidadian schoolteacher, provided a sharp-edged grassroots critique of Froude’s haughty racism and smug, self-fulfilling generalizations in his book *Froudacity* that was published in London one year after Froude’s volume had appeared (Thomas 1889). Although Thomas’s book has become praised in retrospect, it is likely that in the late-nineteenth century Colonial Office readers in London took more seriously the anti-Froude writings of C.S. Salmon, himself an official in the Colonial Office who had held posts in West Africa, Seychelles, and the Caribbean itself. Salmon’s monograph entitled *The Caribbean Confederation* (1888) at times presented a scathing, insightful, and line-by-line repudiation of both the substance and analysis of Froude’s writings. Salmon also presented, not incidentally, a blueprint for the eventual yet short-lived political union among British West Indian colonies that seventy years later would mark their freedom from colonial political rule.

THE DEPRESSION RIOTS

Froude’s relentless reminders about “Hayti” and its associated evils doubtless were more meaningful to West Indian planters domiciled in the islands than they were to London. The sugar bounty depression, after all, had begun a mere half-century after British slave emancipation, and stories about the horror of Haiti, memories of the bloody “Christmas Rising” that had preceded emancipation in Jamaica, and a general, underlying fear that white planters had of their black workforces all were still alive. Black slaves’ potential for riot, rebellion, incendiarism, and murder was, of course, as old as the region’s plantation system itself, and every British Caribbean possession had nurtured Maroon societies of varying size and tenacity (e.g., Craton 1982). And the official discussions prior to emancipation, while focused on labor availability and other economic issues, also had touched

on the troubling possibility that freedmen, without the legal sanctions of slavery, would turn violently on their former masters in bloody reprisal.

It is therefore not surprising that civil disorders of any kind – trespass, jailbreaks, unauthorized strikes, and even grumbling or muted threats – among black workforces in the islands were accorded special apprehension in the decades after slavery, lest they escalate into islandwide conflagrations. And though these Caribbean disturbances were of tiny moment in London's eyes compared with, for example, the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny in India, they occurred sufficiently often to make local administrators wary and even helped shape local policies. In March, 1849, for example, riots were focused on high land rents combined with low prices paid for cultivators' vegetables in Castries, St. Lucia, disturbances that spread into the island's mountain villages, leaving eight persons dead and the Castries jail full (Louis 1982: Chapter 3). Forty years later, in October, 1890, St. Lucian administrators, in attempting to solve the island's financial dilemma, decided not to impose an islandwide land tax on smallholders, citing the 1849 disturbances as an earlier response to government insensitivity.⁵

In the decades prior to the sugar bounty depression, other British West Indian riots similarly shaped Colonial Office policy in the region. Colonial Office sentiment and local planters' viewpoints sometimes collided on important issues; London may be said to have protected freedmen in the post-slavery years, for example, from stringent vagrancy laws that inhibited black workers' mobility from one estate to another or to nearby islands to seek higher wages. But the imposition of Crown Colony government in Jamaica and then elsewhere in the region came after the Morant Bay rebellion in Jamaica in 1865 in which several white landholders were killed. This direct government by the crown, further, has been interpreted "as a means of protecting the interests of European planterdom" (Green 1976:353). In an even broader sense, Morant Bay "was taken afterwards as an explicit demonstration of the failure of British emancipation policy and as evidence of the ex-slaves' incapacity for responsible citizenship" (Holt 1992:307).

The so-called Confederation Riots in Barbados in April, 1876, resulted in eight shooting deaths and the jailing of four hundred who had taken part in disturbances on the island. The issues surrounding the riots were varied, complex, and probably related more to local conditions than anything else. But the oversimplified interpretation provided to the alarmed officials at the Colonial Office was that the proposed administrative confederation of Barbados and the Windwards into a single Crown Colony was favored by blacks and opposed by whites. Barbados kept its representative (planter-dominated) constitution, Governor Pope Hennessy – accused by key members of the plantocracy as an instigator for confederation – was reassigned

to Hong Kong, and Barbados' government came under tighter central control through the formation of an executive committee in 1881 to control and augment the planter assembly (Levy 1980:150-55).

Two disturbances in Trinidad early in the 1880s probably were interpreted by London as rooted more in local events and conflicts than symptomatic of a wider economic malaise in the region as a whole. By the 1870s the island's pre-lenten Carnival, originally a celebration by the local white elite, had become more and more a vehicle for ritual display by black urban dwellers. The carnival celebrations thus came to provide an opportunity – on at least one night of the year – for poor blacks to assemble in “Canboulay” torchlight parades and to mock local convention and propriety with bawdy songs and sham stickfighting. In 1881 Captain Baker, Inspector-Commandant of Trinidad's police, attempted to suppress the Canboulay procession in Port of Spain resulting in a disturbance featuring smashed street lamps and 38 injured police. Similar disorders associated with the Canboulay processions in 1883 spilled over into San Fernando and Princes Town and led to legal restrictions against public torch processions and the eventual abolition of Canboulay celebrations (Brereton 1979:169-75).

A related (in the eyes of the colonial government) incident resulted in the shooting of a number of indentured Indians in Trinidad in October, 1884. If the Canboulay processions were to be controlled and suppressed, the Trinidad government felt that Indian celebrations should be similarly restricted. Laws thereby prohibited Indian celebration processions from entering Port of Spain or San Fernando or from proceeding along a public highway. A confrontation then occurred at San Fernando between police and participants in the Shia Muslim celebration of Muharram, an event the police had attempted to control but which, in their view, had turned into a riot. An estimated sixteen Indians were shot dead by the police and scores injured amid this tragic confrontation (Singh 1988).

The first riots in the British Caribbean to occur after the beginning of the sugar bounty depression broke out in a most unlikely place. Grenada was perhaps alone among the British possessions in its economic reliance on cacao and a resulting smallholder prosperity. Discontent nevertheless flared into violence on Guy Fawkes night in St. George's, November 5, 1885, in an episode whose characteristics paralleled closely the Canboulay disturbances of Trinidad earlier in the decade. For years it had been customary for Grenadians to fling pitch-soaked “fireballs” about the market square, a menacing ritual commemorating Guy Fawkes' attempt to demolish the British Parliament buildings. Local Grenadian merchants had persuaded the newly-appointed governor that the dangerous practice should be abolished. Angered by what they considered a rescinding of local rights, a crowd

fought local police (all of whom were imported Barbadians) by throwing rocks and bottles and smashing street lamps and windows as well. Several persons were imprisoned for up to three months. Handwritten broadsides – some confiscated by the police after the riots – had been distributed beforehand to potential rioters; the handbills enumerated grudges and resentments. They also suggested that the Guy Fawkes disturbances were a symptom of growing frustration by an incipient Grenadian middle class against an officious, incompetent ruling elite and hardly indicative of outbursts by a depression-strangled sugar proletariat.⁶

Much more ominous were the troubles six years later in St. Vincent because they involved a frightening show of force by rural estate workers, an incipient capacity by these workers to organize (a sign that always caught the attention of the Colonial Office), and scattered reports of workers being exhorted to violence by unknown troublemakers. The near-riot occurred in Kingstown in November, 1891, ostensibly over rumored federation between St. Vincent and Grenada but more directly because of a general workers' malaise. An estimated 2,000 men from the countryside, armed with clubs and some marching to the beat of a drum, smashed windows and stoned passers-by on their way to town. An ugly atmosphere had prevailed prior to this gathering, animated by threats to local planters, stories that agitators had provoked the local populace, and rumors that St. Vincent's telegraph wires were about to be cut. The H.M.S. *Buzzard* was summoned from Trinidad, seventy bluejackets off-loaded, and a machine gun taken ashore and set up at the waterfront before the crowd was dispersed and order restored. Governor Hely-Hutchinson of the Windwards came to St. Vincent from his residence in Grenada and conferred directly with some of the spokesmen for the rioters, concluding that their concerns had little to do with federation ideas and much to do with rumors of an impending head tax and a possible prohibition against emigration.⁷

Other disturbances occurred in succeeding years in the Lesser Antilles. For example, in April 1893, the police in Dominica killed four men and wounded four women in the "La Plaine" district on the island's windward coast. The immediate cause of the incident was local resistance to police action taken to curb an illicit traffic in illegally produced rum from Dominica to Martinique. And although all of these disturbances had clear definitions and obvious causes in particular local events, they were subsequently lumped together, at least for Colonial Office consumption, in a published sequence entitled "Notes on West Indian Riots, 1881-1903."⁸ The view of the region from London, or more accurately the bureaucratic filing of disparate reports into a published chronological sequence that hinted strongly at linkages and cause-and-effect, may therefore have conferred, in the eyes

of the Colonial Office, an association among these various events that bore little real relationship to one another on the ground.

As the depression conditions intensified, a growing number of planters bemoaned their financial losses and, although already curtailing the cultivation of cane acreage, threatened to discontinue planting altogether. Accordingly, estate workers were commonly reported as sullen, discontented, and abandoning their normally stoic and deferential demeanors. The Colonial Office monitored with particular interest the workers' collective mood on those islands where sugar cane was the sole economic staple. So it is entirely understandable that the serious disturbances in St. Kitts early in 1896 created warning signals among those monitoring the unfolding of the West Indian bounty depression from their vantage point in London.

When the 1896 harvest season opened in mid-January on St. Kitts, strikes and demonstrations began on two estates near Basseterre over the issue of lowered wages. Pickets kept potential strikebreakers away from the estates, actions that drew crowds of the unemployed from the nearby urban area to observe and join the demonstrations. On the night of January 27th, cane fires were set on both estates, and in the next three weeks over 400 acres of cane set ablaze elsewhere on the island. The widespread incendiarism was accompanied by marches and protests throughout St. Kitts. The intensity of local unrest – which soon had broken out in nearly every village – inspired the local administrator to summon the H.M.S. *Cordelia* from Antigua. On the morning of February 17th, the *Cordelia* anchored off Basseterre, but the ship's presence seemed more to inflame than to quiet the onlookers. Meanwhile, crowds of black estate workers from the countryside had entered Basseterre where they were joined by striking boatmen and waterfront workers. The resultant throng smashed windows and looted shops. The *Cordelia* then off-loaded eighty-six bluejackets, some in Basseterre and some in Old Road Town.

The bluejackets and local police finally quelled the violence at about 3 a.m. During the night the marines had had to control the surging crowds with fixed bayonets. An officer of the bluejackets claimed that every member of his company had been struck with stones and bottles. Two rioters were shot dead during the riots and five others suffered gunshot wounds. Some protestors were reported to have used firearms. Warned of impending trouble on Nevis, two miles across the channel from St. Kitts, a detachment of bluejackets went there to prevent what had happened on the larger island (Richards 1987).

The London Colonial Office was possibly even more alarmed by the riots among indentured Indians at plantation Non Pareil in British Guiana eight months later, in October 1896. Whereas tiny, densely populated sugar cane

islands such as St. Kitts were descended from an earlier era, the coastal estates of British Guiana represented modern, efficient colonial enterprises. Their labor forces, moreover, were replenished each year by fresh, seemingly docile immigrants from India, people whose transportation from their native country and whose subsequent welfare in the British Caribbean were direct responsibilities of the Colonial Office. Of course the shootings of Muslim "rioters" twelve years earlier in Trinidad had involved indentured Indian estate workers, yet serious as this incident was, it still could be interpreted as an enigmatic Asian religious procession that had simply gotten out of control. The 1896 British Guiana incident, on the other hand, was directly related to grievances over work conditions by sugar estate workers.

The Non Pareil riot itself stemmed from actions taken by a planter who attempted to stop cane fires at the estate by transferring to other plantations several indentured workers whom he considered troublemakers. A party of police, commanded by a notoriously violence-prone officer, attempted to arrest four of the men, and a crowd of Indians quickly appeared, pushing, crowding, and surrounding the police detachment to try to prevent the arrest. The police, without reading the riot act, then opened fire on the crowd, killing five, including Jungali, a popular leader of the Indian workers. An additional fifty-nine indentured estate workers were injured in the hail of police fire (Rodney 1981: 158).

The outbreaks of violence in St. Kitts, British Guiana, and elsewhere were followed closely not only by London; they also were highlighted in the local newspapers in the other islands whereby members of the planter class, as well as all others in an increasingly literate populace, learned that riots in nearby places seemed ever more frequent and more intense. In crowded and depression-ravaged Barbados white residents already were anxious about their restive workforces. The island legislature's decision to raise import duties – effectively increasing food prices when wages were static and, in some cases, being lowered – in June 1896, heightened these tensions. More immediately, European soldiers from the Bridgetown garrison were in the process of being transferred to St. Lucia in order to defend the recently-completed coaling station there. Who would then defend white Barbadians in case of a "rising"? One anonymous note by a white Barbadian planter couple sent directly to London told of "uncivilized negros" who spoke of "cutting throats" and "taking everything the whites had" after the troops departed for Castries.⁹

Vice Admiral James Erskine, commander of the troops in the West Indies, offered a preventive suggestion as to how Barbadians – in the future absence of European troops – might defend themselves after the Bridgetown garrison was abandoned. Erskine's suggestion, in late July 1896, probably

soothed whites' fears little, and it also offered full acknowledgement of the possibly infectious nature of the riots that recently had taken place in St. Kitts. Erskine considered that the island's police force, sound yet undermanned, might be augmented and "strengthened by a body of mounted men, grouped in the various districts, in touch with each other, and capable of concentration." In this way, Erskine continued, the plantocracy and their allies would have a "most effective means of quelling riots or dispersing mobs before they attain serious dimensions, and preventing such a deplorable condition of affairs as recently prevailed in a neighbouring Island."¹⁰

But if a proposed mounted cavalry in Barbados were to prove ineffective in the event of islandwide riots, could troops return from St. Lucia in time to prevent a catastrophe? Similarly, if bluejackets stationed in the region were tied up with a "rising" in one place, what response could they provide to another simultaneous disturbance hundreds of miles away? The Colonial Office had to look no farther than Cuba for worst-case answers. The Ten Years' War there from 1868 to 1878 already had ruined much of the Cuban countryside. Much more immediately, of course, was that war had broken out again in Cuba during the 1895 cane harvest; by early 1896, the rebel army in Cuba was estimated at 60,000 and the entire island engulfed in a savage conflict (Schwartz 1989:239-42). Telecommunication reports of the war were monitored at the Colonial Office in London and also published in the weekly newspapers of the British Caribbean. If Cuba, two hundred times larger than one of the tiny British possessions in the eastern Caribbean, was ablaze in a matter of months after conflict erupted, how long would it take in, for example, Antigua? It is a near certainty that members of local plantocracies of the British Caribbean asked themselves these same kinds of questions, especially when riots seemed to be becoming ever more frequent and the economic conditions leading to these disturbances, if anything, were becoming worse.

The scenario described here is little better than informed speculation, and it would be inappropriate to hypothesize a crass cause-and-effect relationship between the frequency of West Indian riots and the eventual formation of the 1897 commission. Further, there is no written, flatly-stated communication yet unearthed that would substantiate such a claim. Yet even with the absence of a written record, it appears more than likely that those responsible for framing policy for the British West Indies were profoundly influenced by the escalating series of riots and considered the formation of a regionwide royal commission, whose members already were disposed favorably toward smallholder settlements (Holt 1992:332-33) as a ploy to curb social unrest and a sensible step to reaching some kind of solution for the problems in the region. The suggestion that the formation of the

commission was by and large precipitated by the escalating West Indian riots, moreover, is supported by some of the commission's earliest testimony. On the first day of 1897 in London, the commissioners heard from H.H. Dobree, Chairman of the Colonial Bank, the probable essence of why the commission had been formed. Asked to predict what would happen if the West Indian sugar industry were to fail, Dobree responded: "Well, it is almost too dreadful to contemplate [...] the labourers would be starved, and I think these men would be very dangerous citizens if they were starving. Already we have seen that; there have been some riots in St. Kitts and in Demerara [...] that is what we at the bank are most apprehensive of in the event of the sugar industry suddenly failing and being obliged to be abandoned, of riots and all sorts of terrible things."¹¹

DISCUSSION

If Dobree's lament can be interpreted as one influential official's informal disclosure of a main reason for the calling of the 1897 commission, a strong case can be put forward for circumscribed riots or disturbances based on particular local events having regional impacts. That is, of course, because the regionwide commission was called and orchestrated in London. It could be argued, for instance, that the 1896 riots in St. Kitts led to land-use changes elsewhere in the British West Indies because of the riot-inspired commission's strong recommendations concerning the formation of smallholder settlements for the region. Ironically, and also lending support to the notion that local events had truly regional impacts, is that St. Kitts itself did not become an island of smallholders. That is because, unlike in some of the other islands, St. Kitts was the locus of the establishment of a modern sugar refinery in 1911 with an eventual circum-island railway that had recapitalized St. Kitts into a modern, islandwide sugar cane unit by 1926 (Richardson 1983:135-40).

The written record of the riots of the 1880s and 1890s is insufficiently detailed to provide clear, definitive reasons as to why, in some cases, passive resistance became collective violence. Everywhere in the British Caribbean, the depression conditions of the late-nineteenth century produced hardship and associated complaints. And everywhere in the region, individual and collective resistance assumed a countless number of forms as it has in other times and other places (e.g., Scott 1990). In many cases resistance was an attitude or activity confined to individuals. Resistance by groups, furthermore, did not necessarily take on overt, violent dimensions. In 1887, for example, a written complaint sent directly to Victoria by three black St.

Lucians asking for the “Political Emancipation of the West Indies” was intercepted and filed by the clerical staff at the Colonial Office.¹² It was not unlike similar petitions sent to “The Queen,” who, it was hoped, might intervene directly to curb the excesses of a tyrannical landholder or unfair estate manager.

There also were gradations of severity among overt disturbances or riots. The riot at Non Pareil estate in British Guiana in October, 1896, was actually one such event among many because there had been, according to the police in British Guiana, more than ten estate disturbances on the colony’s plantations in each of the preceding two years before the one at Non Pareil had resulted in shooting deaths (Rodney 1981:154). And the reason, or reasons, why one disturbance exploded into a full-blown riot and another did not would, again, best be sought in local, specific events and personalities. The origins of the St. Kitts riots, for example, were associated with workers’ protests against a particularly hard-hearted estate owner (Richards 1987). Not insignificantly, the involvement of local police in some of these disturbances seem to have intensified them. This suggestion appears particularly appropriate for the notable disturbances in Trinidad in the 1880s and the Non Pareil riot among the Indians in British Guiana in the following decade. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that, whereas many of these disturbances and riots were so judged and classified in the eyes of their official beholders, in some cases they were worsened, or even created, by the beholders themselves.

In an era when the mobility of working-class individuals was accomplished almost exclusively on foot, the dispersal of sugar cane estates throughout the countryside provided a spatial buffer against the rapid, crowd-swelling dissemination of outrage or other causes for violent outbursts. Isolated disturbances on rural plantations could usually be contained. Riots in the capital towns, however, posed an altogether different problem. And when rural peoples, bent on giving vent to their frustrations, invaded the towns – such as occurred in St. Kitts in 1896 and in St. Vincent five years earlier – administrators and colonial governors became alarmed. Those in London also possibly saw menacing parallels between the crowds of people in West Indian towns and those in Europe that had so terrorized the Continent during the previous century and changed the course of its social history. When Gustave LeBon published *The crowd* in 1895 it was in part a primer on crowd control and doubtless known in London literary circles (McClelland 1989:196). Officials in London also were daily witnesses to the great era of labor unionization in the 1880s and 1890s in Britain that was accented by urban-oriented strikes (Hobsbawm 1987:123).

Yet it is perhaps pushing contemporaneous connections too far to suggest

that Colonial Office officials saw in West Indian rioters the same potential for the kind of ideological organization that was transforming the European masses. The ranks of the Colonial Office itself were full of experienced veterans who considered themselves experts on the nature of Africans and Afro-Caribbean peoples. And there was doubtless a surfeit of contradictory advice and racist dogma as to where the Caribbean riots might lead. One way to defuse these riots, in any case, might be to encourage a class of small landholders in some of the islands. This strategy was apparently, in London's expansive turn of the century view, more sensible than clinging to outmoded and unproductive plantation colonies whose violence-prone labor forces might tie up naval squadrons for months at a time.

The general regional trend from large landholdings to small actually had begun for some of the tiny places of the British Caribbean at mid-nineteenth century as the *metayer* system gave sharecropping peasants stakes in their own islands (Green 1976:254-55). And after the 1897 commission the land-use changes in the islands themselves were not uniform throughout the region. On Dominica in the first decade of the twentieth century the existence of a small-scale peasantry was very noticeable, and by 1927 a visiting commissioner there estimated 1,334 holdings of less than fifty acres each on the island (Trouillot 1988:96-97). Land settlement schemes on St. Vincent, aided by a hurricane and volcanic eruption at the turn of the century that drove away erstwhile plantation owners, were well established on former estate lands by 1911, and by the 1930s St. Vincent had more than 11,000 acres made up of properties of less than ten acres each. The West Indian Sugar Commission of 1929 assessed the state of British Caribbean land tenure, spoke approvingly of the strong recommendations of the 1897 commission, and helped to begin land settlement schemes on Anguilla, Dominica, and Nevis. And in several other islands of the eastern Caribbean the trend was toward small landholdings. By 1961 there were roughly 70,000 farms of less than five acres each from Antigua to Trinidad (O'Loughlin 1968:103).

Greater accessibility to local lands did not end the overall dissatisfaction that brown and black peoples of the islands had over being governed by London through local white elites. Strikes and work stoppages continued into the twentieth century, events that not only demonstrated an increasing capacity of black workers to organize but which also were articulated and publicized from one island to another by working class newspapers. Black veterans of the West Indies Regiment that fought in the Mediterranean in World War I were instrumental in forming workers' organizations throughout the region in the 1920s. Then during the depression decade of the 1930s a series of riots again swept the islands. The riots of the 1930s are generally considered by West Indian historians as pivotal events that led to the forma-

tion of local political parties, the relaxation of voting requirements, and eventual political independence. The definitive history of the 1930s riots in the British Caribbean is yet to be written. When it is, it is likely that the memory and precedent of the riots in the region a generation earlier, as well as the material changes they inspired, will be discovered to have been a good deal more influential than most of us have realized.

ARCHIVAL NOTE

The C.O. (Colonial Office) class numbers and volumes (each individual volume number appears after the first diagonal line) are all found at the Public Record Office, London.

NOTES

1. This article is an amplification of a paper prepared for *Born out of resistance*, a conference dealing with "Caribbean cultural creativity as a response to European expansion," held at Utrecht University, the Netherlands, March 25-28, 1992. Much of the archival material cited here comes from research in London archives during the 1986-1987 academic year, a period funded by grants from the National Geographic Society, the Geography and Regional Science Division of the National Science Foundation, and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.
2. C.O. 28/221, "Act 20 of 1886-7," August 9, 1886.
3. C.O. 321/168, "Sugar Industry," August 28, 1896.
4. C.O. 264/15, St. Vincent Official Gazette, November 4, 1886, pp. 355-57.
5. C.O. 321/123, "Land Tax," October 25, 1890.
6. C.O. 321/86/no. 125, "Disturbances in St. George's on 5th Nov."
7. C.O. 321/133/no. 88, "Disturbance at Kingstown," November 20, 1891.
8. C.O. 884/9/no. 147, pp. 1-16.
9. C.O. 28/241, "Negro Rising," July 10, 1896.
10. C.O. 28/240/no. 129, "Defence," July 31, 1896.
11. Report 1897, Appendix C, part I, "London," p. 25.
12. C.O. 321/101/no. 68, "Memorial of J.E. Quinlan and 2 Others," July 22, 1887.

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