CHAPTER TWELVE

THE WAR IN THE WEST INDIES

Richard Harding

On 27 September 1762 Captain Augustus Hervey of the Dragon (60 guns) arrived in London with dispatches from the West Indies. Letters from Lieutenant General the Earl of Albemarle and Vice Admiral Sir George Pocock announced that on 13 August the great fortress port of Havana had surrendered. Immediately, the news spread across the country, resulting in bonfires of celebration and addresses from counties, boroughs, universities and cities to the king, congratulating him on this latest conquest. British naval power now controlled the main exit from the Caribbean through which almost all commerce from Cartagena de las Indias in the south to Pensacola in the north would have to pass. While almost universally applauded, attitudes were mixed as to what the capture of Havana would now mean.  

The war had been dragging on since the great conquests of 1759. Negotiations had been slowly proceeding since mid 1761 and in July 1762 agreement was close enough for negotiators to begin making preparations for meetings in Paris. Havana could either bring the parties together or throw everything into disarray. Spain might realize she could not hope to gain from continuing the war. On the other hand, Britain might demand yet more from the Bourbon powers. Either way, the fate of the West Indies had assumed major significance for peace.

However, the war had not started this way. Until the last quarter of 1758 the West Indies had not featured much in either British or French plans. This is particularly intriguing. The importance of overseas trade to national treasuries was axiomatic to the calculations of statesmen during the first half the eighteenth century and for Britain, France and Spain the Americas were seen as a fundamental economic driver. The continuous expansion of demand for tropical products in Europe since the 1640s made the West Indies a vital element in the calculations of these states. So important had

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this trade seemed to Britain in 1739 that she launched a war against Spain to protect it. To the British political public, which welcomed that war, it was not just Spain that was the threat, but the fear that without prompt action France would soon overtake Britain in the tropical trades. Yet just seventeen years later, in 1756, action in the Caribbean took a very secondary role in the war that erupted between France and Britain. The re-emergence of the Caribbean as a principal theatre of war is an important theme within the Seven Years’ War.

The West Indies in Anglo-French Relations

The Caribbean Sea lies between latitudes 10°N and 25°N in the Tropic of Cancer. It is bounded on the north, west, and south by the American Continent. To the east, dividing it from the Atlantic Ocean, it is defined by an archipelago of islands, the Greater and Lesser Antilles, stretching in an arc of roughly 2,000 miles north-west to south-east. The winds and currents dictate how sailing vessels plied their course in this sea. The North Equatorial Current and the North East Trade Wind, together carry sailing ships in a constant westerly direction. Before the exact definition of longitude, ships bound from Europe used to sail in a general south-westerly direction, borne along by the trade wind, until they reached the latitude they required and then turned due west. For British ships landfall at Barbados, the most southerly and windward of the British islands, or between Antigua and St Kitts, further north, provided a good mark for a passage before the wind to Jamaica. Ships not sailing in convoy in wartime might aim for a landfall further north at the Virgin Islands, where there was less danger of French privateers. French ships headed for the group of islands dominated by Guadeloupe and Martinique. Passage on to St. Domingue was broadly westerly from there. Spanish ships could enter the Caribbean by the Mona Passage, between Porto Rico and Santo Domingo for passage southwest to the great port of Cartagena in modern Colombia or to the coast of Mexico. From Cartagena they could coast to Porto Bello for the great fair of the Galeones. Ships bound further north could take the wind through the Yucatan Channel to La Vera Cruz for the Mexican fair at Jalapa or, following the currents, push on to Havana on the island of Cuba and thence out of the Caribbean through the Florida

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