BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE CARIBBEAN

He had been in the Caribbean for only two months when, on Christmas Eve, 1492, Christopher Columbus wrecked one of his caravels on the shores of Hispaniola. The Indians came to the rescue. "On hearing the news," Columbus wrote in his log, "[their] king wept. . . . Then he sent all the inhabitants of the village out to the ship in many large canoes. Thus we began to unload her."

In effect, writes Franklin Knight in **The Caribbean: Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism** (Oxford, 1978, cloth & paper), the kindly natives dug their own graves. Knight's book is one of the best historical introductions to the region: scholarly, authoritative, well-written.

The Caribbean that Columbus found was nothing like the India he tried to find. Its islands were sparsely inhabited (total population: 750,000, by Knight's estimate). Many of the smaller islands, such as Barbados and Antigua, were not permanently settled by any of the three local Indian groups—the primitive Ciboney; the proud and fierce Carib; or the sophisticated and peaceable Taino Arawak.

The Arawak were farmers and fishers who organized their villages around ceremonial ball courts. They worked gold, turned pottery, fashioned sculpture, and domesticated at least one animal, a type of dog. "They do not carry arms, nor know them," Columbus wrote. "For when I showed them swords, they took them by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance."

The Indians succumbed first to smallpox, then to a cruel regime of forced labor. By 1502, a Spanish viceroy was resident on Hispaniola. By 1508, 12,000 Spaniards were on the island; African slaves were being imported to make up for a vanishing Indian work force; and Madrid's proconsuls reigned throughout the region.

"For more than a century," Knight writes, "Spain enjoyed the undisputed dominion of the Americas, sending out explorers, settlers, and priests to wander hither and yon. They settled where they could, moved where they liked, fought when the occasion arose, either against the Indians or among themselves. Some went for gold; some for glory; some for God and king. Many died; a few got rich; an undetermined number returned."

As Spain's power waned, other Europeans infiltrated the Caribbean, initially via privateers who harassed Spanish shipping, eventually through well-planned expeditions. By 1640, the peripatetic Dutch were in Guyana, Curaçao, and elsewhere; the English controlled Barbados, Antigua, Montserrat, and other islands; the French held Martinique and Guadeloupe. Even the Danes for a time (1666–1917) owned some of the Virgin Islands before selling them to Washington for $25 million.

Eventually, Madrid lost everything: Jamaica to England in 1655; one-third of Hispaniola (now Haiti) to France in 1697; Cuba and Puerto Rico to the United States in 1899.

Other first-rate surveys include **From Columbus to Castro: The His-**

tory of the Caribbean 1492–1969 (Harper, 1970) by Eric Williams, Trinidad and Tobago's scholar-Prime Minister from independence in 1962 until his death in 1981; **A Short History of the West Indies** (St. Martin's, 1956, cloth; 1972, paper) by J. H. Parry and Sir Philip Sherlock; **Caribbean Transformations** (Aldine, 1974) by Sidney W. Mintz; and Gordon K. Lewis's **The Growth of the Modern West Indies** (Monthly Review, 1968, cloth & paper).

As Gordon Lewis points out in his study of Britain's Caribbean territories, it was not primarily the gold-hungry Spanish but the English and French who created the islands' tobacco and sugar industries.

Plantation society in the West Indies lacked the mythology of "gentility" and paternalism that evolved in the American South. The slaves, Lewis writes, were consigned to "heavy, unremitting work under brutalizing tropical conditions." Against all odds, a small nucleus of "colored" freedmen managed to attend "free schools," work as merchants and professionals, buy land, and build churches.

As plantation life declined—even before British emancipation in 1834—this Creole elite came to dominate island politics and commerce. Ironically, Lewis notes, "they were carriers, perhaps more than any other group, of the 'white bias' of the society." The mass of ex-slaves remained at the bottom of the social hierarchy, disdained by whites and "coloreds" alike.

The white elite lived in constant fear of slave revolt. The abbé de Raynal, in 1770, warned of terrible retribution if blacks ever rallied around a courageous leader. Such a man finally emerged, Toussaint-Louverture, the "black Spartacus," whose bloody, 15-year campaign to oust Haiti's French masters and abolish slavery culminated on January 1, 1804, in a declaration of the country's independence by Jean-Jacques Dessalines.

Haiti became the world's first modern black-ruled state, but in the process destroyed its economy. (Owing to constant warfare, sugar production declined from 70,000 tons in 1789 to 16,000 tons in 1803.) The country never recovered. David Nicholls chronicles Haiti's tragic history **From Dessalines to Duvalier** (Cambridge, 1979).

Haiti's island neighbor, the Dominican Republic, gained its independence in 1844 after a revolt led by the idealist Juan Pablo Duarte (who was promptly exiled). The chief consequence of independence, according to Robert Crassweller in his vivid **Trujillo: The Life and Times of a Caribbean Dictator** (Macmillan, 1966), was to replace the rapacious rule of colonial governors with that of native dictators, even as outside meddling continued.

"So chimerical was Dominican sovereignty in these years," Crassweller writes, "that an American naval captain surveyed the Samaná Bay area for use as a base even before negotiations [for transfer of the tract] had begun."

If nothing else, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, son of a failed rural businessman, introduced to the Dominican Republic a measure of stability during his 31-year (1930–61) tenure. Able, sensuous, corrupt, nationalistic, capricious, theatrical, cruel, Trujillo proudly conformed to every cliché about Latin American despots.

"His rule was hard and brutal and masculine to excess," Crassweller reports, "but he used perfume by the cup and beauty aids, and he de-

lighted in feminine gossip."

Trujillo's assassination in 1961 plunged the Dominican Republic into chaos. American troops landed on the island in 1965, after a confusing coup d'état toppled Donald J. Reid Cabral's unpopular and unelected (but U.S.–backed) regime.

In **The Dominican Intervention** (Harvard, 1972), Abraham Lowenthal untangles a plot so thick that officials in Washington could not keep up with events. Lyndon Johnson's overriding fear was of a communist takeover. "Little foxes, some of them red, are nibbling at the grapes," his Ambassador in Santo Domingo had warned, and that perception—inaccurate, Lowenthal demonstrates—acted as a kind of filter. Opposing assessments could not get through.

Other views of the Dominican crisis are provided by John Bartlow Martin in **Overtaken by Events** (Doubleday, 1966) and Piero Glejeses in **The Dominican Crisis, 1965 Constitutionalist Revolt, and American Intervention** (Johns Hopkins, 1979).

For obvious reasons, Cuba has attracted more scholarly attention than the rest of the Caribbean combined. Hugh Thomas's **Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom** (Harper, 1971) is an exhaustive (1,696 pages) and highly readable account of the island's history from the arrival of the Spaniards until the late 1960s.

In the words of Britain's Lord Albemarle, who captured Havana in 1762, Cuba had developed "with truly majestic slowness" under the Spanish. The island was a mere "provisioner" for Spanish galleons and a barracks for the 5,000 sailors of the Spanish grand fleet who escorted the gold convoys from Veracruz and Portobelo to Seville and Cádiz. Few people lived in the countryside.

The year-long British occupation changed everything. English merchants made Havana a commercial center, while imported slaves and machinery provided the ingredients for a plantation economy based on sugar. Cuba's sugar exports—a scant 500 tons in 1762—soared to 10,000 tons within a decade.

The United States acquired Cuba as a result of the Spanish-American War and gave the island its independence shortly afterward, in 1902. Jorge I. Domínguez takes the story from there up to the present in **Cuba: Order and Revolution** (Harvard, 1978). He provides an in-depth, balanced look at political, economic, and social life on the island both before and after Fidel Castro's 1958 revolution. Two important companion volumes, focusing entirely on the post-revolutionary period, are **The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba** (Stanford, 1969, cloth & paper) by Richard Fagen, and Carmelo Mesa-Lago's **The Economy of Socialist Cuba** (Univ. of N.M., 1981, cloth & paper).

Other case studies of individual island societies include Carl Stone's **Democracy and Clientelism in Jamaica** (Transaction, 1980), a comprehensive survey of the island's "political sociology" (class cleavages, voting behavior, public opinion); Selwyn Ryan's **Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago** (Univ. of Toronto, 1972); and Adalberto López's **The Puerto Ricans: Their History, Culture, and Society** (Schenkman, 1980).

A. W. Singham's **The Hero and the Crowd in a Colonial Polity** (Yale, 1968) traces the rise to power of Eric Matthew Gairy as his island of Grenada (population: 97,000) lurched toward independence during the early 1960s.

Among Singham's many insights:

his analysis of what "small scale" does to modern notions of bureaucracy. In a tiny, close-knit, highly interrelated community, he writes, "all issues tend to become personalized," making a mockery of "the hallowed canons of British administrative practice: anonymity, secrecy, and political neutrality, along with the mythical distinction between policy and administration."

David Lowenthal elaborates in **West Indian Societies** (Oxford, 1972). A West Indian described to him the Public Works Department in a town in Dominica: It "consists of one family—clerks A, B, C, D, E, and F. A is the brother of B and the husband of C. A and B are first cousins of D. B is the brother-in-law of E, C is the sister-in-law of B. F, I do not know how to place her. But I guess she is some kind of relative to E."

Lowenthal perceives the West Indies, in a racial sense, as "a global microcosm," but finds the "rosy image of multi-racial harmony" to be a distortion—another manifestation of the "Kodachrome syndrome" that flavors foreign perceptions of the region.

The local racial situation may be better than it is in many other parts of the world, Lowenthal concedes, but color differences still correlate with class differences, many cricket clubs remain quite exclusive, and there are still some whites who will disown their children for marrying someone with a "touch of color." Yet, for the most part, Lowenthal writes, "whites no longer dominate public affairs, even in [former] plantation strongholds."

The most concise recent overview of the Caribbean scene—its politics, economics, and migration patterns—is **The Caribbean: Its Implications for the United States** (Foreign Policy Association, 1981, paper) by Virginia R. and Jorge I. Domínguez. The authors call for a sustained "developmental" approach by the United States toward the region. The special obstacles to development of the Caribbean are identified by William Demas in **The Economics of Development in Small Countries** (McGill-Queens, 1965).

The Caribbean has witnessed an artistic ferment during much of the 20th century. Two anthologies—**From the Green Antilles** (Macmillan, 1966), edited by Barbara Howes, and **New Writing in the Caribbean** (Guyana Lithographic Co., 1972), edited by Arthur J. Seymour—offer a broad selection of poems and prose by St.-John Perse, Derek Walcott, V. S. Naipaul, John Hearne, E. M. Roach, Aimé Césaire, and others.

In "Piarco," Roach voices a common theme: *The islands cage us/and we long to leave them;/the cities scorn us/and we long to love them./Bite the earth's orange/and her pips are bitter.*

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Titles in this essay were suggested by Jorge Heine, a research associate in the Wilson Center's Latin American Program. Readers may also wish to consult* WQ's *Background Books essays on Cuba (Winter 1978) and Puerto Rico (Spring 1980).*