



General History of the Caribbean

PREFACE

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How should the Caribbean be defined? It is here understood as encompassing not only the islands but also the coastal part of South America, from Colombia to the Guyanas and the riverine zones of Central America, in so far as these parts of the mainland were the homes of people engaged from time to time in activities which linked their lives with those of people in the islands. Despite the varieties of languages and customs resulting from the convergence there – by choice or constraint – of peoples of diverse cultures, the Caribbean has many cultural commonalities deriving from the shared history and experience of its inhabitants. In this region, endowed with exceptionally beautiful landscapes

and still undiscovered ocean resources, there grew up from the sixteenth century onwards a completely new society, which has in our own time distinguished itself by producing a relatively large number of internationally recognized personalities in many fields – poets, novelists, painters, dancers, designers, musicians, sportsmen, jurists, historians, politicians.

In seeking to promote the preservation of cultural identities and greater understanding among peoples through the exchange of cultural information, UNESCO has found it important to facilitate the writing of a new history of this region. I call this history 'new' because until quite recently Caribbean histories were more about exploits of European nation states in the Caribbean – histories of war and trade in the islands and the mainland. Such histories of the individual islands as were published before this time tended to be written from the standpoint of resident Europeans. It was the movement for political autonomy, and the broadening of historiography in the European and American universities in the first half of the century, that led initially to changes of emphasis in the study of the history of single islands, and later to histories of topics which linked the islands, notably the sugar industry, slavery, slave laws and Asian immigration.

In the established universities of Havana and Puerto Rico and in new ones such as the University of the West Indies, departments of Caribbean studies were opened with the aim of undertaking teaching and research on Caribbean literature, history, culture and society, the better to understand forces that had shaped the region and to

identify the many elements which constitute Caribbean culture. The main findings of the scholars since then are reflected in the six volumes of this history, thereby presenting a more regional account than before of the Caribbean past and of the people who have constituted Caribbean society.

This history traces the development of the region starting with the autochthonous peoples of the Caribbean. This includes the hunters and the gatherers as well as the incipient cultivators associated with the beginnings of village life. Situated as they were at what had become the gateway to the New World, these populations were the first to be enslaved. The inhabitants of the Greater Antilles were decimated by acts of excessive inhumanity and disease. The Caribs survived longer through their well-honed fighting skills, but their numbers dwindled nevertheless and in the eighteenth century those who still resisted were transported to the coast of Belize where they established communities that exist to this day and from where they now return to teach their native language – ‘Garifuna’ – to the few Caribs who remain in Dominica and in St Vincent. The story of these early societies is told in the first two volumes.

Volume III of this history (The Slave Societies) constitutes a central point of reference. In examining the creation of new societies, full account is taken of slavery, the terrible toll of human life and suffering it exacted and its pervasive impact on the psyche of the Caribbean people, both white and black. Resistance to slavery took many forms, of which marronnage in Haiti, Jamaica and Suriname, where the numbers were large, has received the most attention. Revolts and rebellions persisted throughout the region from the seventeenth century, although the best known is understandably that which led to Haiti’s independence at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The abolition of the British slave trade left slavery itself intact, until it gradually succumbed in the decades of the nineteenth century, first to the creed of the French Revolution, then to the combination of slave rebellions in the islands and the determined protestations of humanitarians and free traders in Europe.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the disputes between estate owners and the emancipated field labourers, referred to in Volumes I and IV, opened the way for the influx of people from Asia, predominantly from India, thus adding a new element to the Creole societies which had gradually been formed since the sixteenth century. To avoid this supply of new labour for sugar estates becoming the restoration of slavery in a new guise, the recruitment of the labourers and their condition of work in the islands were regulated by law. Nevertheless, the constraints of indenture and the indignities attendant on being estate labourers affected the way in which Creole societies developed in the twentieth century. Undoubtedly, slavery and indenture have influenced the social and economic relations of societies in the circum-Caribbean in ways productive of ethnic and class conflict. Yet they have not only been the sources of cruelty and injustice, of acts remembered and resented. By persistent resistance to these oppressive regimes, these societies have also endowed themselves with the dignity and self-confidence of free men.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the impulse towards autonomy which was felt by some of the propertied and educated elites was frustrated by international, political and economic circumstances outside their control. The production of sugar from cane continued to dominate the Caribbean economies, with oil, minerals and tourism becoming important items in the twentieth century. The influx of American capital and the gradual diminution of European interests in the Caribbean led to the

expansion of American influence in the region from the turn of the century onwards, notably in Cuba, Haiti and Santo Domingo. This was the context in which the movements for self-determination worked, complicated everywhere by racial prejudice and disparities in the ownership of property.

In the years following the Second World War, examined in Volume V, the islands and their immediate mainland neighbours have sought a variety of solutions to the problems which arise from societies asserting political autonomy while possessing economies dependent on overseas markets where their goods are protected from competition. Puerto Rico became the 'Estado Libre', a Commonwealth; the French-speaking islands became departments of France; the Dutch-speaking islands, prior to the independence of Suriname, all became part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands; the British islands first flirted with a Federation, then became independent states separately; other states, following periods of military dictatorship, have pursued the path of socialist revolution. Currently, both in the islands and on the continent, there is a growing tendency for policy to be guided by regionalism, by the impulse towards association and co-operation, towards the formation of trading blocs, initially prompted by geographical propinquity.

These sub regions have recently begun concerted efforts towards recognizing and confirming that their mutual interests will be served by closer association. It is therefore appropriate that the two UNESCO projects of the *General History of the Caribbean* and the *General History of Latin America* are being undertaken simultaneously. The two histories should be read together as distinct parts of a unified whole, as an element in UNESCO's contribution to regional development through mutual understanding and cultural integration. Every effort will be made for both histories to reach as wide a public as possible in the major languages of the region, through the universities, through the schools by means of specially adapted versions (textbooks and children's books), and eventually through radio and television, plays and films.

I wish, in conclusion, to extend my sincere thanks to the Chairman, Rapporteur and members of the International Scientific Committee and to the editors and authors of the Preface various volumes who have come together to participate in this significant enterprise. My thanks also go to the governments and universities which have supported the project and to the Association of Caribbean Historians, so many of whose members have contributed generously to the creation of this work.