

## Chapter 3

### The Peoples of Jamaica

The motto of Jamaica is: 'Out of Many – One People', and Jamaica is indeed an amalgam of different groups and races.

On 12 October, 1492, Christopher Columbus landed on one of the islands of the Bahamas called by the Indians Guanahani, and he renamed it San Salvador, or Holy Saviour. On his second voyage to the Caribbean he learned about the island of Jamaica from Indians in Cuba; and on 3 May, 1494, he arrived at St Ann's Bay on the north coast. On 4 May he annexed the island for King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain and then sailed to Cuba. Jamaica was not fully taken over by the Spaniards until 1509, and in 1540 the island was presented by the King of Spain to the family of Columbus as a personal estate which it could develop as it saw fit.

At no time did the Spaniards really make a success of colonizing Jamaica, which was used mainly as a base for further exploits in the Caribbean area. They did very little to develop the country's resources. The Spaniards treated the Arawak Indians brutally, and those who did not die from smallpox and other diseases were maltreated, tortured, starved and sometimes callously killed for sport. The condition of these humiliated Amerindians was such that thousands committed suicide and murdered their children rather than suffer mutilation by the Spaniards.

During the late sixteenth century disturbances in the Iberian peninsula resulted in a flow of European immigrants into Jamaica. In 1580 King Philip II of Spain annexed Portugal, and persecuted Jews in particular fled to the island, where they referred to themselves as 'Portugals'. In this way they were able for some time to conceal the fact that they were Jews who had escaped the net of the Inquisition, and they practised their faith in secret.

The Spaniards' position in Jamaica was always insecure and it is estimated that at the beginning of the seventeenth century there were probably no more than 1,500 Spaniards on the island. They had, however, brought with them some of their own negro slaves, most of whom they had obtained from Africa and had used in Spain before transplanting them to the West Indies.

On 10 May, 1655, Admiral William Penn and General Robert Venables landed at Passage Fort and marched to Spanish Town. The

Spaniards soon realized their inability to withstand the English and surrendered; they were then ordered to leave the island. The Spaniards freed their slaves, and then escaped to the north coast of the island and sailed for Cuba. Such was the identity between the negro slaves and their Spanish owners that the former considered themselves the natural enemies of the English. These freed slaves, and other slaves who ran away from their owners and joined them from time to time, were referred to as Maroons, probably from the Spanish *cimarron*, meaning 'wild, untamed'. The Maroons spent their time hunting wild pig and plundering estates, as well as engaging in guerrilla warfare against the English.

Despite all the efforts of the English to suppress the Maroons they presented a formidable obstacle to peaceful settlement in the new English colony. The colonists were dogged by fevers and famine, epidemics and ambushes; and eventually they were driven to eating almost anything they could find, including dog, rat and horse meat, as well as lizards. Cromwell tried to alleviate the situation of an ever-decreasing white population by sending out a thousand Irish girls and some Scotsmen. Planters were also being attracted to Jamaica from Barbados, Bermuda and New England. It was clear, however, that the actual working of the land was too arduous and enervating a task for most white people. In 1664, therefore, a large number of slaves was transported to the West Indies to work the land; these were euphemistically referred to as 'predials', or farm-workers. This marked the real beginning of an ever-expanding slave trade, in which captured Africans were bought and sold like cattle and herded into ships and living accommodation in such a way that they died like flies from epidemics, hunger and despair.

In 1670, by the Treaty of Madrid, Jamaica was officially ceded by the Spanish to England, and in 1674 some 1,200 settlers came from Surinam, or Dutch Guiana, on the north coast of South America. They began sugar planting. By the turn of the century there must have been over 50,000 people in Jamaica, of very mixed race and nationality; so that during the first forty-five years of occupation by the English there had been a considerable expansion of both population settlement and land cultivation.

There were three broad divisions in the population: whites who were property and plantation owners; whites who were virtually slaves – deported criminals, fugitives from justice and indentured servants; and negro slaves from Africa who could never hope for freedom, but who could simply look forward to a life of debilitating

work, poor and inadequate food, and torture. In addition, there were the Maroons living an isolated existence in the interior; and there were those with Spanish or Arawak blood in their veins, though by now there could have been no pure Arawak Indians left. In order to deal with the guerrilla menace of the Maroons some Mosquito Indians were imported from Nicaragua in 1738 because of their prowess in tracking. Finally, the conflict with the French, which was brought to a conclusion in 1782, probably resulted in French prisoners being brought to Port Royal to swell the Jamaican population. There were also some French-speaking refugees from Haiti.

In 1807 the slave trade between Africa and Jamaica was officially abolished by the English Parliament, which meant that after 1 March, 1808, it became illegal to transport any more slaves to Jamaica. This brought an end to a very substantial trade; it has been conservatively estimated that, from the time when Jamaica came into the hands of the English until the abolition of the trade, over one million human beings were imported from Africa as slaves. In 1807 there were some 319,350 slaves in the colony.

On 28 August, 1833, the Abolition of Slavery Act was passed, which enacted that all slave children under six years of age should be set free immediately, that any children born after that date would be born free, and that there should be a six-years' period of apprenticeship for freed slaves from 1834 to 1840. When the apprenticeship system was inaugurated by the Governor, all religious buildings of every denomination were open for divine service and they were packed. But the apprenticeship system was not a success, and it was ended on 1 August, 1838.

By 1841, because a very large number of the freed slaves had contracted out of working for their former masters, labour had to be sought elsewhere. Between 1834 and 1865, over 11,000 free African immigrants settled in Jamaica, which far exceeded the number of the indentured labourers who were imported from India over this period. Other immigrants arrived from Germany, Scotland and Ireland, but many of them soon fell victims to the rigours of the tropical climate. Those who survived very quickly found work other than the hard labouring on the estates, for which they had originally come, so that the really pressing problem of 'predials' was not completely solved. As the number of immigrants from Africa fell away, the most important labour immigrations to Jamaica became those from India and China; those from India began in 1845 and continued

until 1917, during which time about 33,000 Indians settled on the island. Between 1860 and 1893 some 5,000 Chinese also arrived. So that today, whilst the largest percentage of Jamaicans are of African descent, there is a multiplicity of nationalities represented on the island.

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