

THE BRITISH CARIBBEAN COLONIES

During the past ten years, increasing attention has been paid to the political problems of the British Caribbean Colonies. These colonies, some of which were acquired by England as long ago as the early 17th century, now appear to have started on the road leading to a greater measure of political autonomy. This movement, which has made rapid progress since the Second World War, is the outcome of a long political evolution, dating from the era of colonial conquest. In studying this evolution, it may be useful to recall where the British Caribbean Colonies are situated, what elements comprise their population, and what are the main problems, economic and social, confronting their governments.

Some Geographical Notes

It is sometimes assumed, even in Canada, that the British Caribbean Colonies consist of a small group of obscure islands in the Caribbean Sea. Their actual extent is considerable. To the west, in the Greater Antilles, lie the islands of Jamaica and the Caymans; to the east, in the Lesser Antilles, lie the British Virgin Islands, Barbados, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Grenada, St. Christopher, Nevis, Antigua, Montserrat, and Dominica*; to the south of them lie the islands of Trinidad and Tobago, near the coast of Venezuela. Also included in the British Caribbean Colonies are the Bahamas, an archipelago consisting of a cluster of small islands situated on the edge of the tropics, north of Cuba and Haiti and close to the coast of Florida; the Turks and Caicos Islands, geographically part of the Bahamas, but politically dependencies of Jamaica; British Honduras, wedged between Mexico and Guatemala, south of the Yucatan Peninsula; and finally, British Guiana, situated on the north coast of South America and bordered by Venezuela, Brazil and Surinam (Dutch Guiana).

It will thus be seen that these colonies are far from constituting a geographical entity and are separated by great distances. Jamaica is a thousand miles from Trinidad and seven hundred miles from British Honduras, while four hundred miles separate Port of Spain (Trinidad) from Georgetown (British Guiana).

Population

The British Caribbean Colonies contain about three million inhabitants, unevenly distributed among the various territories. Some islands are over-populated (Barbados, for example, has a population density of 1,190 per square mile); but other colonies, such as British Guiana with only 5 inhabitants per square mile, are thinly peopled. The population is extremely heterogeneous. The great majority of the inhabitants (over 90% in some colonies) are of the Negro race, but there are also a minority of whites, important Indian communities, (mainly in British Guiana and Trinidad) and a few small groups of Chinese, Syrians, and aborigines. Miscegenation makes the picture even more complex: in Jamaica and Barbados, for instance, it is estimated that groups of mixed races make up about 20% of the population.

In addition to the mixture of races there is a wide diversity of customs and traditions. During the course of their history, most of the colonies were submitted to the influence of different cultures, and this can be seen in the speech and manners of the people. Thus, in Jamaica, Barbados and the Leeward Islands, the social atmosphere is predominantly English, whereas in Dominica, St. Lucia and Grenada the influence of French culture is still apparent. In Trinidad, an island which, before passing into the hands of the British, was first colonized by the Spanish Government

* For purposes of administration, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Grenada and Dominica comprise the Windward Islands. St. Christopher and Nevis, Antigua, Montserrat and the British Virgin Islands constitute the federal colony of the Leeward Islands.