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THE WEST INDIA INTEREST

"OUR TOBACCO COLONIES," wrote Adam Smith, "send us home no such wealthy planters as we see frequently arrive from our sugar islands."[1] The sugar planter ranked among the biggest capitalists of the mercantilist epoch. A very popular play, "The West Indian," was produced in London in 1771. It opens with a tremendous reception being prepared for a planter coming to England, as if it were the Lord Mayor who was expected. The servant philosophized: "He's very rich, and that's sufficient. They say he has rum and sugar enough belonging to him, to make all the water in the Thames into punch."[2]

The West Indian planter was a familiar figure in English society in the eighteenth century. The explanation lies in the absentee landlordism which has always been the curse of the Caribbean and is still one of its major problems today.

One absentee planter once argued that "the climate of our sugar colonies is so inconvenient for an English constitution, that no man will chuse to live there, much less will any man chuse to settle there, without the hopes at least of supporting his family in a more handsome manner, or saving more money, than he can do by any business he can expect in England, or in our plantations upon the continent of America."[3] But the West Indian climate is not disagreeable, and, his fortune once made, the slave owner returned to Britain. Writing in 1689 the agent for Barbados stated that "by a kind of magnetic force England draws to it all that is good in the plantations. It is the center to which all things tend. Nothing but England can we relish or

fancy: our hearts are here, wherever our bodies be. . . . All that we can rap and rend is brought to England."[4] In 1698 the West Indies were sending back annually to England about three hundred children to be educated, the difference being, according to Davenant, that the fathers went out poor and the children came back rich.[5] "Well," says Mr. Belcour, the planter, in the comedy "The West Indian," "for the first time in my life here am I in England, at the fountain-head of pleasure, in the land of beauty, of arts, of elegancies. My happy stars have given me a good estate, and the conspiring winds have blown me hither to spend it."[6] Returned to England, the planters' fondest wish was to acquire an estate, blend with the aristocracy, and remove the marks of their origin. Their presence in England, as Brougham pointed out, had a frequently deleterious effect on English character and morals; where they were numerous and had acquired land, they commonly introduced a bad state of manners into the locality.[7] Their colossal wealth permitted lavish expenditures which smacked of vulgarity and excited the envy and disapproval of the less opulent English aristocracy.

The political economist, Merivale, later in the nineteenth century argued that the change from residence to absenteeism was a credit rather than a disgrace to the English character, as evincing a distaste for the deep-rooted hard-heartedness and profligacy of life in the slave colonies. But that peculiar fastidiousness which shrank from contact with slavery whilst it had no objection to enjoying the profits of slavery, Merivale could explain only by "the general apology of the inconsistency of human nature."[8]

Absenteeism, however, had serious consequences in the islands. Plantations were left to be mismanaged by overseers and attorneys. On occasions governors found it difficult to obtain a quorum for the councils. Many offices were held by a single individual, and the disproportion between white and black population was increased, aggravating the danger of slave rebellions. The Deficiency Laws failed to restrain the practice of absenteeism, so the local assemblies tried to confiscate the large tracts of land lying idle and owned by absentees, and proposed their redivision among small farms. Both measures were opposed

by the British government at the insistence of the absentee planters.[9]

Of the sugar planters resident in England the most prominent were the Beckfords, an old Gloucestershire family dating back to the twelfth century. One died fighting for his king on Bosworth Field in 1483, another found in the English conquest of Jamaica a means of retrieving the family fortunes. In 1670 Alderman Sir Thomas Beckford, one of the first of absentee proprietors, was getting £2,000 per annum from his Jamaican property clear of all charges. Peter Beckford became the most distinguished of the new colonists. He held in the course of time all the most important military and civil positions in the island, became President of the Council and later Lieutenant-Governor and Commander-in-Chief. At his death in 1710 he "was in possesion of the largest property real and personal of any subject in Europe." In 1737 his grandson, William, inherited the family wealth and became the most powerful West Indian planter in England.[10]

Beckford, on his Wiltshire estate, built Fonthill Mansion, long regarded as the most attractive and splendid seat in the West of England.

> "It was a handsome, uniform edifice, consisting of a centre of four stories, and two wings of two stories, connected by corridors, built of fine stone, and adorned with a bold portico, resting on a rustic basement, with two sweeping flights of steps: its apartments were numerous, and splendidly furnished. They displayed the riches and luxury of the east; and on particular occasions were superbly brilliant and dazzling. Whilst its walls were adorned with the most costly works of art, its sideboards and cabinets presented a gorgeous combination of gold, silver, precious metals, and precious stones, arranged and worked by the most tasteful artists and artisans. Added to these splendours, these dazzling objects, apparently augmented and multiplied by large costly mirrors, was a vast, choice, and valuable library. . . . Some idea may be formed of the extent, etc., of the house by the measurement of its great entrance hall, in the basement story, which was eighty-five feet ten inches in length, by thirty-eight feet six inches in breadth. Its roof was vaulted, and

supported by large stone piers. One apartment was fitted up in the Turkish style, with large mirrors, ottomans, etc., whilst others were enriched with fine sculptured marble chimney-pieces."[11]

Beckford, Junior, was not to be outdone. Possessed of a vivid fancy and a vast fortune which, according to the family historian, could not be satisfied with anything commonplace, he desired novelty, grandeur, complexity and even sublimity. The result was Fonthill Abbey, the construction of which provided employment for a vast number of mechanics and laborers, even a new village being built to accomodate some of the settlers. The abbey grounds were in one section planted with every species of American flowering shrub and tree, growing in all their native wildness.[12] In 1837 Beckford was awarded £15,160 by way of compensation for 770 slaves he owned in Jamaica.[13]

The Hibberts were West Indian planters as well as merchants, who, as we have seen, supplied cotton and linen checks for Africa and the plantations. Robert Hibbert lived in Bedfordshire off the income from his West Indian property. His plantation was one of the finest in Jamaica; "though he was always an eminently kind master," his biographer assures us, "he had no repugnance to this kind of property on moral grounds." On his death he left in trust a fund yielding about one thousand pounds per annum for three or more divinity scholarships to encourage the spread of Christianity in its simplest and most intelligible form and the unfettered exercise of private judgment in matters of religion.[14] A relative, George, was partner in an opulent trading firm in London, and was for many years agent of Jamaica in England. George Hibbert took the lead in the construction of the West India Docks. He was elected first chairman of the board of directors, and today his portrait, painted by Lawrence, hangs in the board room of the Port of London Authority. A great collector of books, the sale of his library lasted forty-two days.[15] The Hibberts received £31,120 in compensation for their 1,618 slaves.[16] The family mansion in Kingston, one of the oldest houses in Jamaica, still stands today, while the family name is perpetuated in the Hibbert Journal,

the celebrated quarterly journal devoted to religion, theology and philosophy. First published in October, 1902, the Journal had "the sanction and support of the Hibbert Trustees," who, however, disclaimed responsibility for the opinions expressed in its pages.[17]

Also connected with Jamaica were the Longs. Charles Long, at his death, left property in Suffolk, a house in Bloomsbury, London, and total property in Jamaica comprising 14,000 acres. He enjoyed a very great income, by far the largest of any Jamaican proprietor of that period, and was accordingly entitled to live in splendor.[18] His grandson, a Jamaican planter, wrote a well-known history of the island. A relative, Beeston Long, Jr., was chairman of the London Dock Company and a Bank director, and his family mansion in Bishopsgate Street, London, was justly famous.[19] Another member of the family, Lord Farnborough, built Bromley Hill Place in Kent, one of the most famous mansions of England, noted for its wonderful ornamental gardens.[20]

Not content with his partnership in the Liverpool business house of Corrie and Company engaged in the grain trade, John Gladstone was indirectly concerned in the slave traffic as a slave owner in the West Indies. "Like many more merchants of reputed probity and honesty, (he) was able to satisfy his conscience by arguing it to be a necessity." Gladstone, through foreclosures, acquired large plantations in British Guiana and Jamaica, while at the same time he was extensively engaged in the West Indian trade. The sugar and other produce which he sold on the Liverpool Exchange were grown on his own plantations and imported in his own ships. The fortune amassed by this means permitted him to open up trade connections with Russia, India and China and to make large and fortunate investments in land and house property in Liverpool. He contributed largely to the charities of Liverpool, built and endowed churches, and was an eloquent champion in the town of the Greeks in their struggle for independence. When his famous son, William Ewart, was electioneering in Newark in 1832, a public journal, accurately if not in good taste, reminded the electors that the candidate was "the son of Gladstone of Liver-

pool, a person who had amassed a large fortune by West India dealings. In other words, a great part of his gold has sprung from the blood of black slaves."[21] During the greater part of the agitation for emancipation John Gladstone was chairman of the West India Association, and on one occasion conducted a memorable controversy in one of the Liverpool journals with James Cropper, a Liverpool abolitionist, on the question of West Indian slavery.[22] The compensation paid to Gladstone in 1837, in accordance with the Act of 1833, amounted to £85,600 for 2,183 slaves.[23]

The Codringtons were another well-known family which owed its wealth and status to its slave and sugar plantations. Christopher Codrington was governor of Barbados during the seventeenth century, and his plantations in Barbados and Barbuda were worth £100,000 in modern money. He founded a college there which still bears his name, and on his death left £10,000, most of it for a library, and his valuable collection of books worth £6,000 to All Souls College, Oxford, where they formed the nucleus of the famous Codrington Library. One of his descendants was hero of the naval victory of Navarino in the cause of Greek Independence in the nineteenth century.[24]

The Warner family was dispersed over the Leeward Islands, some in Antigua, some in Dominica, some in St. Vincent, some in Trinidad. Thomas Warner was a pioneer among British colonists in the Caribbean. Joseph, one of the family, rose to be one of the three leading surgeons of his day, surgeon at Guy's Hospital, and first member of the College of Surgeons founded in 1750. His picture by Samuel Medley is in the possession of the Royal College of Surgeons. In the nineteenth century another Warner was President of the Council of Antigua, while yet another, as Attorney-General of Trinidad, was the great advocate of East Indian immigration. Perhaps the best known of this West Indian family is Pelham Warner, famous English cricketer and acknowledged authority on the great English game.[25]

Other names, less spectacular, recall the glory that was sugar. Bryan Edwards, historian of the British West Indies at the end of the eighteenth century, would, by his own confession, have

lived and died in oblivion on the small paternal estate in the decayed town of Westbury in Wiltshire, but for his two opulent uncles engaged in sugar cultivation in the West Indies.[26] The Pinneys, well-known in Bristol, owned sugar plantations in Nevis.[27] Joseph Marryat's son was Captain Frederick Marryat, the famous novelist of sea life, and the inventor of a code of signals for the merchant marine not abandoned until 1857.[28] Colonel William Macdowall was the most notable figure in Glasgow. "Owner of a noble mansion in the country and a rich estate in the West-Indies, with ships on the seas and cargoes of sugar and rum constantly coming home, he had also the social prestige of his army rank and his long family descent, and must have held the regard of everyone as he stepped, with his tall goldheaded cane, along the causeway."[29]

Bryan Edwards indignantly denied the charge that his fellow planters were remarkable for gigantic opulence or an ostentatious display of it. The available evidence points to the contrary. The wealth of the West Indians became proverbial. Communities of opulent West Indians were to be found in London and Bristol, and the memorial plaques in All Saints' Church, Southampton, speak eloquently of the social position they once enjoyed.[30] The public schools of Eton, Westminster, Harrow, and Winchester, were full of the sons of West Indians.[31] The carriages of the planters were so numerous, that, when they gathered, Londoners complained that the streets were for some distance blocked. The story is told of how, on a visit to Weymouth, George III and Pitt encountered a wealthy Jamaican with an imposing equipage, including out-riders and livery. George III, much displeased, is reported to have said, "Sugar, sugar, eh? all *that* sugar! How are the duties, eh, Pitt, how are the duties?"[32] West Indian planters were familiar visitors at the resorts of Epsom and Cheltenham;[33] their children mingled on terms of equality with the elegant throngs at the Assembly Rooms and the Hot Wells of Bristol.[34] A West Indian heiress was a desirable plum, and Charles James Fox almost decided that the £80,000 fortune of Miss Phipps was the solution to his heavy gambling debts.[35] One might speculate on what effect such a marriage would have had on Fox's career as an abolitionist.

Many a humble individual in England rose to wealth and affluence from some chance legacy of a West Indian plantation. The time came when such a legacy was considered gall and wormwood,[36] but it was not so in the eighteenth century. George Colman's play, "Africans," portrays in Young Mr. Marrowbone, the butcher, a situation that must have been very familiar to the audience. The butcher was left a West Indian plantation, and "now barters for blacks, instead of bargaining for bullocks."[37]

The strength of the planters was increased, too, by the large number of West Indian merchants who drew vast profits from the West Indian trade. According to Professor Namier, "there were comparatively few big merchants in Great Britain in 1761 who, in one connection or another, did not trade with the West Indies, and a considerable number of gentry families had interests in the Sugar Islands, just as vast numbers of Englishmen now hold shares in Asiatic rubber or tea plantations or oil fields."[38] The two groups did not always see eye to eye. At the outset planters and merchants represented distinct organizations, and the bond between them—credit—did not always make for harmony. But this in itself would not have been a basic cause for conflict, as the merchant could always have recourse to foreclosure. More important than the factor of debt was the planters' determination to maintain monopoly prices, and in the struggle for the grant of a direct trade to Europe in 1739 ill-feeling between the two groups increased considerably.[39] But by and large the identity of interests was greater and more important than the clash, and planters and merchants finally coalesced about 1780, when all the strength they could jointly muster was soon to be needed to strengthen the dykes of monopoly against the gathering torrent of free trade.

The combination of these two forces, planters and merchants, coupled with colonial agents in England, constituted the powerful West India interest of the eighteenth century. In the classic age of parliamentary corruption and electoral venality, their money talked. They bought votes and rotten boroughs and so got into Parliament. Their competition forced up the

price of seats. The Earl of Chesterfield was laughed to scorn in 1767 when he offered £2,500 for a seat for which a West Indian would offer double.[40] No private hereditary English fortune could resist this torrent of colonial gold and corruption. The English landed aristocracy were indignant, "vexed, put to great expenses, and even baffled" by the West Indians at elections.[41] There is an unmistakable note of this concern in the warning issued by Cumberland in his drama to the West Indian ostentatiously flaunting his wealth and boasting of his plans to spend it. "To use it, not to waste it, I should hope; to treat it, Mr. Belcour, not as a vassal, over whom you have a wanton and a despotic power; but as a subject, which you are bound to govern with a temperate and restrained authority."[42] In the elections of 1830 a West Indian planter successfully spent £18,000 getting himself elected in Bristol.[43] The election expenses of the unsuccessful West Indian candidate in Liverpool in the same year cost nearly £50,000, of which a rich West Indian merchant, slave trader and slaveowner, John Bolton, supplied one-fifth.[44]

The Beckford dynasty was fittingly represented in Parliament in accordance with its wealth. King William was M.P. for Shaftesbury from 1747-1754, and for the metropolis from 1754-1770. Another brother represented Bristol, a third Salisbury, while a fourth was intended for a Wiltshire borough.[45] Richard Pennant at one time represented Liverpool.[46] One of the Codringtons was a member of Parliament in 1737.[47] George Hibbert represented Seaford from 1806 to 1812.[48] Edward Colston, the Cunard of the seventeenth century, sat for Bristol from 1710 to 1713.[49] The West India interest established a monopoly, in all but name, of one Bristol seat. John Gladstone sat first for Woodstock and then for Lancaster; it was his pleasure to listen in May, 1833, to the maiden speech of his son, M.P. for Newark, in defence of slavery on the family estates in Guiana.[50] The great statesman found all his filial feelings involved in the question of slavery, and his family connections with West Indian sugar plantations brought out all his eloquence.[51] One of the Lascelles sat in Parliament in 1757.[52] To the bitter end Henry Goulburn fought the West Indian battle.

In 1833 he was still asking Parliament to mark the impulse given to trade and agriculture, and to look at the hamlets that had sprung into towns, in consequence of the connection with the colonies.[53] Parliament paid no heed, and Goulburn had to be content with nearly £5,000 compensation for his 242 slaves.[54] Joseph Marryat of Trinidad, Henry Bright of Bristol, Keith Douglas, Charles Ellis, all were West Indians. Ten out of fifteen members of one of the most important committees of the Society of Planters and Merchants held seats in the English Parliament.[55]

To make assurance doubly sure the West Indians, like the slave traders, were entrenched not only in the lower house but also in the House of Lords, to defend their plantations and the social structure on which they rested. Passage from one house to another was easy, peerages were readily conferred in return for political support. There are few, if any, noble houses in England, according to a modern writer, without a West Indian strain.[56] Richard Pennant became Lord Penrhyn. The Lascelles, an old Barbadian family, were ennobled and became Harewoods; one of their descendants is at present married to the sister of the reigning King of England. The Marquis of Chandos, sponsor of the "Chandos Clause" in the Reform Bill of 1832, owned West Indian plantations and was a spokesman of the West India interest, though he lived to see the day when it was almost hopeless to advocate the cause of the West Indies.[57] The Earl of Balcarres possessed sugar plantations in Jamaica. Emancipation found him owner of 640 slaves, for whom he received nearly £12,300 compensation.[58] This explains his hysterical opposition, as governor of the island, to the convention made by General Maitland with the slave leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture, for the evacuation of Saint Domingue after Britain's abortive effort to conquer the French colony. "It would be thought somewhat odd," he wrote home, "if the City of London should send over an immense quantity of provisions and clothing for the use of the *sans culotte* army assembled for the purpose of invading England!"[59] Lord Hawkesbury, né Jenkinson, was a West Indian proprietor,[60] and, as President of the Privy Council for Trade, he lent consistent support to the

cause of the slave owners and slave traders. For this devotion tracts in favor of the slave trade were dedicated to him,[61] and Liverpool conferred on him the freedom of the city in gratitude for the essential services rendered to the town by his exertions in Parliament in support of the slave trade.[62] Hawkesbury symbolized the connection by assuming the title Earl of Liverpool when raised to the peerage and accepting the Corporation's offer to quarter its arms with his own.[63]

It was not only the mother of parliaments that the slave-owners dominated. Like their allies, the sugar merchants and slave traders, they were in evidence everywhere, as aldermen, mayors and councillors. William Beckford was alderman of the city of London and twice Lord Mayor. Contemporaries laughed at his faulty Latin and loud voice; they were forced to respect his wealth, position and political influence. As mayor his civic entertainments were magnificent. On one occasion, at a sumptuous banquet, six dukes, two marquises, twenty-three earls, four viscounts, and fourteen barons of the Upper House joined the members of the Commons and went in procession to the city to honor him. He remains famous, this slaveowner, for his defence of Wilkes and liberty of speech, indifferent to royal displeasure.[64] In the London Guildhall there stands a splendid monument erected in his honor, with the famous speech, graven in letters of gold on the pedestal, which made George III blush.[65] His brother Richard was also an alderman of the city of London. William Miles lived to become an alderman of Bristol. George Hibbert became an alderman of London.[66]

The West India interest had powerful friends. Chatham was the consistent defender of West Indian claims, right or wrong, and was a close friend of Beckford. "He should ever consider the sugar colonies as the landed interest of this kingdom, and it was a barbarism to consider them otherwise."[67] John Gladstone and John Bolton were vigorous supporters of Canning, who always harped on the fearfulness and delicacy and "most awful importance" of the West Indian question.[68] Huskisson and Wellington were very cordially disposed to the planters, the latter refusing to "plunder the proprietors in the West Indies in order to acquire for themselves a little popularity in

England,"[69] the former considering emancipation unattainable by legislative interposition or statutory enactment.[70] But the recalcitrance of the planters and their wilful refusal to make concessions to the anti-slavery sentiment of England later alienated these friends. Canning found West Indian slavery an unpalatable topic;[71] slave questions nearly drove Huskisson mad and the planters seemed to him insane;[72] Wellington, before the final word was said on British slavery, subjected a West Indian deputation in London to some rough treatment.[73]

Allied with the other great monopolists of the eighteenth century, the landed aristocracy, and the commercial bourgeoisie of the seaport towns, this powerful West India interest exerted in the unreformed Parliament an influence sufficient to make every statesman pause, and represented a solid phalanx "of whose support in emergency every administration in turn has experienced the value."[74] They put up a determined resistance to abolition, emancipation, and the abrogation of their monopoly. They were always on the warpath to oppose any increase of the duties on sugar, which Beckford once described as "a *coup-de-grace* to our sugar colonies and sugar trade."[75] The West India interest was the *enfant terrible* of English politics until American Independence struck the first great blow at mercantilism and monopoly.

In 1685 the governor of Jamaica protested that any additional duty proposed on sugar would discourage planting, throw new plantations out of cultivation and prevent the enlargement of others. By the proposal "Virginia receives a mortal stab, Barbados and the Islands fall into a hectic fever, and Jamaica into a consumption."[76] In 1744 the planters sent their case to every member of Parliament in an attempt to encourage popular clamor against another proposal to increase the sugar duties. The proposal was carried by a majority of twenty-three. "Nor was the smallness of it matter of surprize to those who considered how many were either by themselves or their friends, deeply concerned in one part or another of the sugar trade, and that the cause itself was always popular in the House of Commons."[77] The West Indians, however, succeeded in transferring

the extra duty proposed on sugar to foreign linens. The whole episode merely illustrated "the difficulties which attended the laying a further duty upon sugar from the number and influence of those concerned directly or indirectly in that extensive branch of trade."[78]

The issue came up again when it was necessary to finance the Seven Years' War. The landed aristocrat of England was usually the supporter of his brother in the colonies, but when it came to choosing between himself and his distant relative he took the view that "his shirt was near him but his skin was nearer." Beckford, in defence of his fellows, was interrupted by horse-laughs every time he uttered the word "sugar."[79] The magic finger was writing. The agent for Massachusetts reported in 1764 that there were fifty or sixty West Indian voters who could turn the balance any side they pleased.[80] It was the heyday of the power of the West India sugar interest. But in the new century and in the Reformed Parliament there appeared another combination of fifty or sixty voters. It was the Lancashire cotton interest, and its slogan was not monopoly but laissez faire.