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# Developing Little England: Public Health, Popular Protest, and Colonial Policy in Barbados, 1918-1940

Brittany J. Merritt

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Developing Little England: Public Health, Popular Protest, and Colonial Policy in  
Barbados, 1918-1940

by

Brittany J. Merritt

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of History  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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## Abstract

This dissertation analyzes struggles over the development of Barbadian health and sanitation during the period between the world wars. In doing so, it examines how the British Empire tried to use development policies to maintain its power overseas during the interwar years. During this period, British policymakers sought to improve health and sanitation to pacify restive Barbadian laborers influenced by transnational pan-African and socialist ideas following the First World War. However, white Barbadian elites, influenced by ideas of eugenics and population control, opposed metropolitan efforts to develop health and sanitation in the colony. Rather than repairing the colonial relationship, British development efforts instead resulted in a protracted legislative and public battle over health reform. White creole resistance to public health policies both destabilized British reform efforts and further undermined black Barbadian understandings of imperial identity. By the 1930s, Pan-African critiques of empire, which the British government had fought to suppress following the First World War, found renewed energy in the midst of British failures to provide basic welfare services to poor black subjects. The fractures in these bonds of empire ultimately resulted in serious labor disturbances that re-emphasized the tensions of British colonialism and redirected the course of imperial policy. By focusing on these conflicts, this project reveals how struggles over colonial reforms on the ground transformed ideas of emerging nationhood, imperial identities, and British strategies of rule in the years leading up to decolonization.



## Chapter One

### Introduction

In 1929, a West Indian shopkeeper named Alfred Goring appeared before the British sugar commission in the colony of Barbados. The commissioners were interviewing a number of local physicians and residents in an attempt to determine why the death rate in the colony was so high. Goring's description of infant care in a system that forced poor black mothers employed in agriculture to return immediately after childbirth to canefields or starve made for horrifying testimony. Goring stated, "When they have all gone out to work there is nobody left to care the children who lie in their own mess right through to their swaddling-bands."<sup>1</sup> As Goring's testimony made clear, in the plantation-based colony of Barbados, where labor was both plentiful and cheap, black lives were expendable. In the following days, Barbadian pan-Africanists discussed the visit of the sugar commission during meetings of the local Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) chapters. In Barbados, they declared, "the white man never die from starvation, he die from the counting of his money but the Negro die from starvation."<sup>2</sup> However, according to the activists, this situation was not just the fault of local white elites. Barbados, the speakers argued, belonged to England, and Barbadians had always been loyal subjects: it was the English who were allowing Barbadians to starve.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barbados Department of Archives, Black Rock, Barbados (hereafter BDA), Pam 136 A, Proceedings of the West Indian Sugar Commission, additional testimony, 97-99.

<sup>2</sup> BDA, GH 4/36, Detective Brathwaite to Detective Inspector, October 30, 1929.

<sup>3</sup> BDA, GH 4/36, Detective Skeete to Sargeant Jones, October 28, 1929.

The testimony before the Commission, and the reaction of Barbadian pan-Africanists, illuminates some of the deep tensions that marked British colonialism during the interwar period. British propaganda and rhetoric had long portrayed the empire as a “trustee” and caretaker for subject populations. However, by the post-World War I era, increasing awareness of the suffering endured by most British colonial subjects undercut longstanding justifications for imperialism. The experience of war, international exchanges of people and information, and the influence of anti-colonial ideas led colonial subjects worldwide to understand that British claims of trusteeship were, in fact, hollow. For the Caribbean colonies, which ranked amongst Britain’s oldest imperial possessions, the failures of British rule became particularly pronounced. Poor, black West Indian subjects, long ensconced in British culture, traditions, and education, were amongst those who believed the most in promises of trusteeship, yet also suffered deeply from imperial neglect.

The British West Indies, once boasting the wealthiest and most lucrative colonies in the empire, had fallen into economic stagnation by the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> The colonies were profoundly marked by the legacy of slavery and the plantation, as a predominantly black, exploited workforce labored on sugar and banana estates that experienced ever-decreasing profits in a crowded global market. The monoculture and labor saturation of most Caribbean colonies stifled economic opportunity, and the majority of black West Indian workers had little access to participation in the exclusive colonial states and assemblies that managed their affairs. The social and physical consequences of this economic servitude and political disenfranchisement were severe, as impoverished West Indian workers suffered high rates of disease, malnourishment,

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<sup>4</sup> O. Nigel Bolland, *The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean: The Social Origins of Authoritarianism and Democracy in the Labour Movement* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001), 123-126.

and mortality.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the Caribbean, even as young West Indians were taught that they were British subjects belonging to a great and wealthy empire, the bleak daily struggles faced by these children and their families threw the promised rewards of Britishness into harsh relief.

The most economically depressed and unhealthy of these colonies was the island of Barbados, one Britain's oldest imperial possessions. Established in 1627, just a year prior to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Barbados boasted the nickname of "Little England" for its longstanding adherence to English customs and culture. The white elites who governed the small colony, situated on the meeting place of the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, considered themselves members of the English gentry and romantically christened the island "Bimshire," imagining it as a far-flung county of England. This sense of belonging to the "mother" country was not confined only to white planters, however. Barbadians of all backgrounds expressed their connection to Great Britain, as the black middle classes made claims to Britishness for social and political advancement.<sup>6</sup> Even poor black sugar workers swore allegiance to the Crown out of a belief that Queen Victoria had freed their enslaved ancestors.<sup>7</sup> Dispossessed black laborers in Barbados believed in the notion of trusteeship, adhering to the idea that the British government would someday intervene on their behalf.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the pride that so many Barbadians claimed in being British, the colony was a tragic representation of British colonialism. The chronically low wages and systems of

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<sup>5</sup> *West India Royal Commission Report* (London: HMSO: 1945), 134-154.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Spry Rush, *Bonds of Empire: West Indians and Britishness from Victoria to Decolonization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, BDA, GH 4/36, Detective Brathwaite to Detective Inspector, Report on Workingmen's Association Meeting, June 11, 1927. Other poor West Indians also swore loyalty to the British monarch because of Queen Victoria. See, for instance, Brian Moore and Michelle Johnson, *Neither Led Nor Driven: Contesting British Cultural Imperialism in Jamaica, 1865-1920* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2004), 271-310.

<sup>8</sup> Colonial subjects in other parts of the empire also believed that the British monarch would protect their rights against white British settlers, and sent petitions to the Crown in an attempt to redress local grievances. Ravi de Costa, "Identity, Authority, and the Moral Worlds of Indigenous Petitions," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48:3 (2006): 675-80.

exploitation that characterized the rest of the post-emancipation British Caribbean also existed in Barbados, where social divisions according to race and class were particularly rigid. The wealthy, white planter and merchant class, the largest resident white population in the British Caribbean, sustained harsh rule over an enormous, mostly-black labor force by keeping workers in a state of constant poverty. The majority of Barbadians belonged to this poor class of black workers, who cut sugar cane, performed domestic service, or labored as dockworkers for pitiable wages. The black and colored middle classes, concerned with protecting their tenuous economic positions, had little sense of racial solidarity with the poor black masses.<sup>9</sup> Even the community of impoverished white “redlegs,” who were widely shunned by white elites, considered themselves racially superior and scorned all black Barbadians.<sup>10</sup> The effects of segregation, poverty, malnutrition, and overcrowding were catastrophic. Poor Barbadians suffered high rates of disease and death, which mostly derived from preventable causes such as poor diet and a lack of sanitary facilities. The most heartbreaking consequences of these conditions fell upon the youngest and most vulnerable Barbadians, as the colony consistently had the highest infant mortality rate in the British Empire. In some years, nearly half of newborns died before they reached the age of two.<sup>11</sup>

The miserable conditions of poor, black West Indians demonstrated the harrowing repercussions of longstanding British neglect in the region. Following the end of the Great War, as the problems of British imperialism became increasingly clear, the influence of the Bolshevik Revolution and ideologies like pan-Africanism provided a new language for transnational

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<sup>9</sup> Colored refers to Barbadians of mixed descent. Gordon K. Lewis, *The Growth of the Modern West Indies* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968), 229-230.

<sup>10</sup> “Redlegs” were poor, white descendants of predominantly Irish and Scottish indentured servants, who had migrated to the colony in the seventeenth century. Jill Sheppard, *The “Redlegs” of Barbados: Their Origins and History* (Millwood, NY: KTO Press, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom (hereafter TNA), CO 28/302/29, The Duke of Devonshire to Charles O’Brien, September 14, 1923; The Thirteenth Annual Report of the Public Health Inspector (Acting), 1925, in *The Official Gazette*, August 18, 1927, 1101.

critiques of capitalism, inequality, racism, and empire. West Indians were in the thick of this flourishing international milieu, whether it was in diasporic urban centers like London and Harlem, or in the villages and rum shops of the Caribbean.<sup>12</sup> Black West Indians had a compelling case to make against British colonialism, as black troops had suffered discrimination in European armies, black workers labored under the exploitative rule of white employers, and black babies died while white children lived. In the years following the war, black West Indians organized to press for improved economic and social conditions in their home colonies.<sup>13</sup>

In particular, the rise of Marcus Garvey's UNIA and the social and political movement it represented was profound in Barbados as well as the wider Caribbean. Garvey, a Jamaican pan-Africanist, argued that all people of African descent shared a common experience of discrimination, poverty, and inequality. According to Garvey and his followers, the only way to end black suffering was to unite the African diaspora and found a black nation. Garvey's vision of black nationalism, with its corresponding message of racial and economic empowerment, spread around the world in the years following the First World War.<sup>14</sup> As Adam Ewing has persuasively argued, what was important about Garveyism was "the engagement of its

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth Century America* (London, 1999); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, 2003); Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962* (Durham, 2005); Susan Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton, 2009); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Carol Polsgrove, *Ending British Rule in Africa: Writers in a Common Cause* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Bolland, *The Politics of Labour*, 155-211.

<sup>14</sup> Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976); Mary G. Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

proponents in a sustained and more informal project of organizing, networking, and consciousness raising” across the diaspora. It was important not only as an ideology, but as “a method of organic mass politics.”<sup>15</sup> This new method of mass politics reached poor black Barbadians, who found in pan-Africanism a language to explain their suffering, take pride in their African heritage, and find hope in belonging to an international political movement that transcended the boundaries of one colony or empire. As urban laborers embraced black internationalism and middle-class black professionals slowly gained the right to vote through property ownership, non-elite Barbadians increased their demands for political representation and economic opportunity.

As radical movements gained momentum, and anti-colonial nationalism spread throughout the empire, it became clear to anxious officials in the colonies as well as in London that something had to be done to prevent an imperial crisis. For British administrators, the presence of unrest in the Caribbean colonies was symptomatic of even deeper problems in the wider empire. Additionally, the proximity of the newly restive British West Indian colonies to the United States caused concern, as the rise of American economic and military dominance following the war meant that Great Britain needed to maintain its strategic foothold in the Western Hemisphere. Yet as U.S. philanthropic organizations like the Rockefeller Foundation took an increasing role in the region, British officials worried that the U.S. was a better caretaker of British subjects than Britain itself.<sup>16</sup>

These multiple challenges, in combination with a new international focus on the principle of trusteeship in colonial affairs, transformed how Britain governed its empire. The “third British

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<sup>15</sup> Adam Ewing, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Steven Palmer, *Launching Global Health: The Caribbean Odyssey of the Rockefeller Foundation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

Empire,” or the stage of British colonialism from the end of World War I to the post-World War II period, was a time fraught with tension as Britain struggled to pay the costs of imperial occupation and maintenance while colonial peoples made increasing claims for expanding the rights of British subjecthood.<sup>17</sup> During this era, imperial officials struggled to balance these demands with the need to preserve British hegemony overseas. In an attempt to maintain Britain’s legitimacy as a global power and to secure the support of subject populations, colonial authorities in London began to urge a number of reforms to relieve the misery of subject populations. Colonial officials hoped that improvements in education, development of infrastructure, and advances in sanitation across the empire would stave off unrest and reinforce traditional colonial power structures. Protean attempts to improve colonial welfare through nascent development policies became a central component of British approaches to imperial rule in the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of colonial development has its roots in the nineteenth-century idea of a “civilizing mission” that rationalized European imperial expansion. The language of “trusteeship” situated Europeans as a group meant to oversee and guide “backwards” populations, which justified and maintained colonial rule by keeping subject people in a state of perceived dependency.<sup>19</sup> By the interwar period, as critiques of imperialism mounted, colonial officials and metropolitan experts increasingly used the term “development” to describe state-directed efforts

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<sup>17</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, “Whatever happened to the Third British empire? Empire, Nation Redux,” in *Writing Imperial Histories*, ed. Andrew S. Thompson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 168-187. See also John Darwin, “A Third British Empire? The Dominion Idea in Imperial Politics,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 4, *The Twentieth Century*, ed. Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64-87.

<sup>18</sup> Penelope Hetherington, *British Paternalism and Africa, 1920-1940* (London: Frank Cass, 1978); Michael Worboys, “British Colonial Science Policy (1918-1930),” in *Colonial Sciences: Researchers and Institutions*, ed. Patrick Petitjean (Paris: Orstom Editions, 1996), 99-111.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Cowen and R.W. Shenton, *Doctrines of Development* (London: Routledge, 1996).

to benefit the lives of colonial peoples.<sup>20</sup> Development became, according to Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard, “a framing device through which colonial regimes tried to respond to challenges and reassert control and legitimacy.”<sup>21</sup> Imperial governments worked to reinforce colonial rule by spearheading improvements in local infrastructure and services, and expanding the governing power of local states.

This dissertation explores the different ways in which British efforts to reshape colonial relations played out in the colony of Barbados from the end of World War I to 1940. During this period, British policymakers pressured the Barbadian government to improve health and sanitation in order to pacify restive Barbadian laborers influenced by transnational pan-African and socialist ideas following the war. Officials focused on health because it was an issue that dramatically displayed the extent of official neglect on the bodies of colonial subjects.

Inadequate sanitation and limited access to medical care affected Barbadians personally, whether it was a whole family infected by typhoid due to lack of sanitary facilities, white “redlegs” suffering from hookworm because they worked barefoot in waste-soaked fields, or laboring mothers who watched helplessly as their children died from dysentery. Such miserable conditions, in Barbados as well as other British colonies, provided ample evidence for critics of empire, capitalism, and racism following the war, and imperial officials came to believe that winning the hearts and minds of their subjects could be achieved by improving their bodies.

Health and welfare, then, became tools of colonial statecraft for imperial officials attempting to pacify restive subjects during the interwar period, and the British government initiated a number of official commissions to spearhead medical reforms in Barbados. Yet, as

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<sup>20</sup> Hetherington, *British Paternalism in Africa*, 90.

<sup>21</sup> Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard, “Introduction,” in *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 18.



this dissertation argues, British efforts to improve Barbadian health to create stability only led to further conflict. Welfare discourses provided political tools for Barbadian pan-Africanists, who criticized white indifference to black suffering in the colony. Their arguments were strengthened when white creole elites resisted medical reform in order to maintain local hegemony. Barbadian elites, who maintained a level of local political and economic control unique in the British Caribbean, refused to concede to any outside influence. Conflicts between white creole elites and the British state over the question of health reform would have long-lasting implications. When the British government ultimately refused to supersede local white elites to fulfill their commitment to Barbadian welfare, it both undermined the belief of Barbadian workers in the idea of British protection and trusteeship, and created the space for Barbadian claims to greater participation in the state. Increasingly, aspiring black politicians began to make a case for their leadership abilities based on improving Barbadian social conditions.

Rather than repairing the colonial relationship, then, the ambivalence and contradictions intrinsic to interwar British development policies instead resulted in a protracted legislative and public battle over health reform. Focusing on these nascent development policies helps explain the mechanics of British imperial decline and the process through which postcolonial nations emerged. At all levels, the politics of disease, mortality, and sanitation were shaped and transformed reciprocally between colony and metropole, and created room for resistance never anticipated by British policymakers. Conflicts over health became a prism through which both Barbadians and British officials alike sketched out evolving understandings of the state, the nation, and the empire in a period in which these notions were in flux. Thus, the very policies meant to restore British imperial power actually began the process of decolonizing the Caribbean.

Modern imperialism was marked by great strain and fragility, as the liberalism of nineteenth-century empires advocated equality and the universal nature of man while at the same time creating categories of exclusion to justify imperial expansion.<sup>22</sup> These paradoxes meant that colonizers had to continually re-define knowledge categories in order to uphold their power.<sup>23</sup> Scholars of colonial health and medicine have contributed a rich literature about these colonial knowledge projects, both by analyzing biomedicine as a tool of imperial conquest and by contributing to understandings of how indigenous subjects resisted, co-opted, and transformed Western medicine.<sup>24</sup> During the expansion of nineteenth-century empires, health was central to how the British government exerted and maintained its rule, as it gave “a pretext for the extension of state power into the everyday lives of its subjects.”<sup>25</sup> Medicine became central to the idea of a “civilizing mission,” working both as a tool of control as well as establishing “the moral authority of the imperialising power.”<sup>26</sup> Yet, while colonialism used the body as a place for constructing its authority and control, this process was not monolithic. Instead, “the body formed

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Uday S. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> Shula Marks, “What is Colonial about Colonial Medicine? And What has Happened to Imperialism and Health?” *Social History of Medicine* 10, no. 2 (August 1997): 205-219; Warwick Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Alison Bashford, *Imperial Hygiene: A Critical History of Colonialism, Nationalism and Public Health* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2003); Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Megan Vaughan, *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1991.

<sup>25</sup> Norman Owen, “Towards a History of Health in Southeast Asia”, in *Explorations in Social, Medical and Demographic History*, ed. Norman Owen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987): 19.

<sup>26</sup> Lenore Manderson, *Sickness and the State: Health and Illness in Colonial Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 231-235.

a site of contestation and not simply of colonial appropriation.”<sup>27</sup> More than a simple tool of empire, colonial medicine became a locus for the struggles, strains, and tensions of colonialism.

By the twentieth century, a focus on native welfare in colonial policy became imperative as challenges to empire mounted, both by anti-colonial nationalists and by British audiences skeptical of the benefits and morality of empire.<sup>28</sup> Colonial medicine became both “mission and mandate”; on the one hand, medicine worked to modernize colonial societies along European models, while on the other hand, colonizers emphasized medicine as crucial to developing indigenous welfare.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, by the interwar period, international bodies like the League of Nations Health Organization were working to manage diseases and populations across borders through global cooperation and the standardization of biomedical knowledge.<sup>30</sup> As ideas of European “trusteeship” for subject peoples intrinsic to the League of Nations mandate system became part of the wider logic of postwar empires, developing colonial health and welfare became a new strategy of British rule as an effort to convince subject populations and world opinion alike of the benefits of imperialism and the ability of Great Britain to manage and maintain colonial bodies.

Focusing on interwar colonial welfare policy bridges two historiographical fields. As Warwick Anderson has pointed out, many historians of colonial medicine cease their analysis at the end of the long nineteenth century, while historians of development confine their work to the post-World War II period. Instead, he argues, there exist “continuities between the late-colonial civilizing process and international development projects” during the interwar period that require

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<sup>27</sup> Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, 8-10.

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Owen, “Critics of Empire in Britain,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 4, *The Twentieth Century*, 188-211.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Worboys, “The Colonial World as Mission and Mandate: Leprosy and Empire, 1900-1940,” *Osiris*, 2:15 (2000): 208.

<sup>30</sup> Alison Bashford, “Global biopolitics and the history of world health,” *History of the Human Sciences* 19:1 (2006): 67-88.

further analysis.<sup>31</sup> Much of the literature on colonial policy and development focuses on colonial administrators and decisions by metropolitan governments.<sup>32</sup> However, scholars have begun to instead pay attention to how development policies and ideologies intersected with local conditions, revealing the limitations of these initiatives as well as how development models were informed by local knowledge.<sup>33</sup> These scholars have shown that colonial development was not a single discourse or system imposed by Europeans on colonized people.<sup>34</sup> Monica van Beusekom, for instance, demonstrated that interwar French development policies were not simply top-down state practices, but were transformed through a process of negotiation and exchange with rural African farmers.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, as Joseph Hodge and Helen Tilley have shown, interwar development logic was influenced by the increasing faith of European governments in scientific knowledge. Colonial officials relied upon social scientists, medical doctors, and expert advisors to gather information about local conditions in the colonies, knowledge that metropolitan states used to craft policies.<sup>36</sup> Thus, scholars have demonstrated that ideas of colonial development and improvement were not concrete initiatives, but consisted of a series of struggles between colonial officials, metropolitan experts, local medical practitioners, and colonial subjects.

The vast literature on colonial development during the first half of the twentieth century focuses heavily upon African and Asian colonies, but as I show in this dissertation, the British

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<sup>31</sup> Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> For the “official mind” of colonial development, see D.J. Morgan, *The Official History of Colonial Development*, vols. 1-5 (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1980); S.R. Ashton and S.E. Stockwell, eds. *Imperial Policy and Colonial Practice, 1925-1945. Part 1: Metropolitan Reorganisation, Defence and International Relations, Political Change and Constitutional Reform* (London: HMSO, 1996); Stephen Constantine, *The Making of British Colonial Development Policy, 1918-1940* (London: Routledge, 1984).

<sup>33</sup> Joanna Lewis, *Empire State-Building: War and Welfare in Kenya, 1925-52* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000).

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History, c. 1930-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Monica van Beusekom, *Negotiating Development: African Farmers and Colonial Experts at the Office du Niger, 1920-1960* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002)

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007); Helen Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

government also experimented with development schemes in the Caribbean during the interwar years.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, most of the literature on colonial development centers on European attempts to make colonies more economically profitable, mostly through agricultural “modernization” and reform.<sup>38</sup> While economic policy was crucial, efforts to improve health and welfare also became part of the logic of development efforts during the interwar period. For the British Empire, the twin emphasis on economic and social development became codified in the 1940 Colonial Development and Welfare Act. The roots of this legislation lay in British struggles in the Caribbean in the years leading to World War II.<sup>39</sup> Analyzing conflicts over interwar health and welfare policies in the West Indies, then, illuminates both the genealogy of postwar development programs as well as the problems that characterized late colonialism.

The British Caribbean has been a rich field of study for analyses of the tensions of colonialism. While most scholarship on this region focuses upon experiences of slavery, the post-emancipation period has also attracted considerable scholarly attention.<sup>40</sup> Historians of the post-emancipation British Caribbean have analyzed at length the “problem of freedom” for West

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<sup>37</sup> Others have looked at colonial development schemes in the Leeward Islands and Jamaica. Richard Harris, “Making leeway in the Leewards, 1929-1951: The negotiation of colonial development,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 33:3 (2005): 393-418; Darcy Hughes Heuring, “Health and the Politics of ‘Improvement’ in Jamaica, 1914-1945,” (PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> David Anderson, *Eroding the Commons: The Politics of Ecology in Baringo, Kenya, 1890-1963* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002); Suzanne Moon, *Technology and ethical idealism: A history of development in the Netherlands East Indies* (Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2007); Charles H. Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination, and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Robert L. Tignor, *W. Arthur Lewis and the Birth of Development Economics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); S. Ravi Rajan, *Modernizing Nature: Forestry and Imperial Eco-Development, 1800-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Howard Johnson, “The West Indies and the Conversion of British Official Classes to the Development Idea,” *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 15:1 (1977): 55-83.

<sup>40</sup> Franklin W. Knight, *The Caribbean, the Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Frank McGlynn and Seymour Drescher, eds. *The Meaning Of Freedom: Economics, Politics, and Culture after Slavery* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992); Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd, eds., *Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society from Emancipation to the Present* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1993); Bridget Brereton and Kevin Yelvington, eds., *The Colonial Caribbean in Transition: Essays on Postemancipation Social and Cultural History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999); Gad Heuman and D. V. Trotman, eds. *Contesting Freedom: Control and Resistance in the Post-Emancipation Caribbean* (London: Macmillan, 2005).

Indian people and the various social, political, and economic transformations following the abolition of slavery.<sup>41</sup> Yet, surprisingly, few studies have been conducted about health and medicine in the West Indies during this time period.<sup>42</sup> West Indian medical history both illustrates and departs from the arguments made in the existing literature of colonial health, medicine, and development. In the Caribbean, as in Africa, British officials were concerned with managing, controlling, and pacifying black bodies, and attempted to use health policy as a tool of colonial power throughout the interwar period.<sup>43</sup> Along with this came familiar stereotypes of “unfit” black mothers and “lazy” black laborers that were part of the disciplinary racial rhetoric and hierarchy of colonialism. Yet, in Barbados there was less of a concern regarding “native policy,” because Barbadians were not indigenous subjects, but creoles: neither African nor European.<sup>44</sup> Also, unlike relatively “new” colonies in Asia and Africa, in which imperial science competed with indigenous methods of healing, European medical knowledge was already

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<sup>41</sup> Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*; Bridget Brereton, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad, 1870-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Bonham Richardson, *Panama Money in Barbados 1900-1920* (Memphis: University of Tennessee Press, 1985); Patrick Bryan, *The Jamaican People, 1880-1902: Race, Class, and Social Control* (Kingston: University of West Indies Press); Kevin Singh, *Race and Class Struggles in a Colonial State: Trinidad 1917-1945* (St. Augustine: University of the West Indies Press, 1994); Brian L. Moore, *Cultural Power, Resistance, and Pluralism: Colonial Guyana, 1838-1900* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); Erna Brodber, *The Second Generation of Freeman in Jamaica, 1907-1944*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), Moore and Johnson, *Neither Led Nor Driven*.

<sup>42</sup> Notable exceptions include essays in Juanita De Barros, Steven Palmer, and David Wright, eds., *Health and Medicine in the Circum-Caribbean 1800-1968* (London: Routledge, 2009); Heuring, “Health and the Politics of ‘Improvement’ in Jamaica”; Margaret Jones, *Public Health in Jamaica, 1850-1940: Neglect, Philanthropy, and Development* (Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 2014); Juanita De Barros, *Reproducing the British Caribbean: Sex, Gender, and Population Politics After Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>43</sup> Randall Packard, *White Plague, Black Labor: Tuberculosis and the Political Economy of Health and Disease in South Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Vaughan, *Curing their Ills*; Heather Bell, *Frontiers of Medicine in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1899-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Myron Echenberg, *Black Death, White Medicine: Bubonic Plague and the Politics of Public Health in Colonial Senegal, 1914-1945* (London: James Currey, 2002).

<sup>44</sup> In the British West Indies, “creole” refers to people of both European or African ancestry, or a combination of both, who were born in the Caribbean. For definitions and discussions of “creole” and “creolization” in the West Indian context, see Kamau Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); O. Nigel Bolland, “Creolisation and Creole Societies: a Cultural Nationalist View of Caribbean Social History,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 44:1-2 (1998): 1-32; Richard D.E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity during the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

entrenched in Barbados from three centuries of colonial rule. There was not, as David Arnold observes in early colonial India, “a general atmosphere of suspicion, doubt, and resistance that haunted Western medicine.”<sup>45</sup> Rather than resist, many Barbadians welcomed and participated in European healing practices.

This dissertation will discuss how the story of health and development in interwar Barbados was a political and economic struggle conducted on a number of levels, including a contest over policy.<sup>46</sup> Both British administrators and white Barbadian elites desired to control, order, and govern black colonial subjects, but had opposite strategies to achieve this goal. British policymakers viewed health reform as a tool of empire, a method to manufacture consent and loyalty from disillusioned black workers. In contrast, Barbadian elites regarded reform and centralization as a threat to local power in the island, and believed that improving the standard of living of poor, black laborers would have a negative effect their willingness to work. The conflicts between these two “top-down” strategies of managing black bodies would produce serious problems for both the local and imperial states. When white elites refused to implement reforms that would benefit the wider population, both working- and middle-class black Barbadians used struggles over health reform first to criticize local white rule in the island and, later, the unwillingness of the British government to intervene on behalf of its subjects. At the same time, aspiring middle-class politicians of color adopted welfare discourses to garner votes from people who desired reform and make a case for their own leadership over the local government. At all levels of this story, welfare and development provide a lens to understand how British and Barbadian people navigated the tensions of late colonialism and worked out conflicting perspectives on the role of the state. Yet, there is a deeply human component of this

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<sup>45</sup> Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> David Scott, “Colonial Governmentality,” *Social Text* 43 (1995): 191-220.

narrative that should not be lost in wider claims about politics and colonial power. Many Barbadians simply wanted access to a better life, and having a chance at watching their children survive infancy was a key component to that life.

As challenges to imperialism mounted after the war, metropolitan officials increasingly blamed poor social conditions in the Caribbean for the unrest, and came to believe that preventing disease and lowering high infant mortality rates would make West Indian populations less susceptible to radical politics. In the mid-1920s, the Colonial Office began to place great pressure on the Barbadian government to centralize and modernize the fragmented, inefficient public health system in the colony. Yet, these policies were not high-minded reforms imposed from above, but were mutually constituted in correlation to local knowledge and practices. Indeed, the basis for British pressure to reform Barbadian public health in the 1920s lay in the medical advice and reform efforts of the white, liberal Barbadian physician John Hutson, who had been advocating health modernization since the early twentieth century. Metropolitan experts, such as the physicians and scientists in the Colonial Advisory and Sanitary Committee, then adopted Hutson's ideas. The Colonial Office used the advice of these experts to urge Barbadian health reform, bringing the combination of local and metropolitan knowledge in colonial policy-making full circle.

Nevertheless, while metropolitan policymakers viewed health reform as a strategy of pacification, white elites in the colony had a different understanding of how to deal with the problem of radical unrest and electoral change. The power of the white ruling class in Barbados rested on decentralized, local rule, a personal culture of violence and rewards, and severe economic and social controls.<sup>47</sup> This pattern of rule, similar to that of white settler colonies in

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<sup>47</sup> Mark Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006).



Africa and the Dominions, had been in place in the colony almost since settlement. Contrary to British policymakers, white elites in Barbados believed that if the lives of laborers became too comfortable, whether it be through higher wages or better social conditions, they would be less inclined to work. Thus, when British officials urged reform efforts to centralize and improve Barbadian public health, it struck at the heart of white planter power in the colony. Conservative white Barbadians used every discursive and legislative tool in their arsenal to resist British-mandated health reform efforts. By the late 1920s, elite resistance to medical care led to increased backlash against local rule, as black Barbadians came to understand the indifference of planter and merchant elites to their welfare.

White resistance to health reform was not the only problem with colonial development initiatives in Barbados. As the debates over public health in Barbados reveal, there were serious problems with British colonial policy itself. Even though Lord Devonshire had famously declared that Britain's postwar purpose was "the protection and advancement of the native races," the emphasis on colonial welfare after the war was, in actuality, a "complacent trusteeship" that British officials would abandon when it became too difficult or costly to implement.<sup>48</sup> When white Barbadian elites opposed metropolitan efforts to develop health and sanitation in the colony, the British government refused to override their authority. This inaction showed black Barbadians that the British government did not actually care about their welfare, and would rather keep them subject to the autocratic rule of an intransigent, racist, exploitative, and violent white elite rather than take the political risks of direct intervention. Instead of restoring Barbadian loyalty to the empire, health reform only exposed the ambivalence of Britain's commitment to the welfare of black subjects, and destabilized British colonialism further. Increasingly, black Barbadians would take local reform into their own hands.

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<sup>48</sup> R.D. Pearce, *The Turning Point in Africa: British Colonial Policy, 1938-1948* (London: Frank Cass, 1982).

Welfare initiatives in the empire were also constrained by the British policy of self-sufficiency, in which each colony had to pay for its own government and infrastructure.<sup>49</sup> When the Colonial Office pressured Barbados to reform its public health system, therefore, they expected the Barbados government to pay for it. Additionally, the individuals that crafted these policies did so with mixed motives and in the midst of great disagreement. International pressure towards trusteeship forced Colonial Office officials to pay lip service to colonial welfare, but the British Treasury rejected efforts to pay for colonial projects. On a different level, while British imperialists desired colonial development to benefit Britain economically and increase British prestige, the doctors, experts, and humanitarians employed by the Colonial Office cherished a sincere, if paternalistic, desire to benefit native wellbeing. Interwar development policies were thus disjointed, conflicting, and ambivalent, and expose the fractures and tensions of late colonialism.

Finally, as the dissertation will show, the same knowledge systems that constituted British strategies of rule were also the ones that contributed to imperial decline, as British reform efforts opened the door for Barbadian agency and critiques of empire.<sup>50</sup> When metropolitan experts and officials sent commissions to inquire into health conditions in Barbados, Barbadians increasingly, and collectively, began to understand the extent of suffering under both local and imperial rule. When the local government refused to implement British-mandated health reforms, it exposed the fragility and ambivalence of imperial power. At the same time, British promises of imperial responsibility and trusteeship seemed like a great lie as the metropolitan state did nothing to alleviate Barbadian suffering. It appeared that the British government was offering less and less, while ideologies like black internationalism posed an attractive alternative to the

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<sup>49</sup> Heuring, "Health and the Politics of 'Improvement' in Jamaica."

<sup>50</sup> Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory*, 323; Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

British imperial system. Focusing on struggles over public health in Barbados, then, provides a useful lens to analyze how both British and colonial subjects negotiated shifting imperial relationships in the twentieth century.

This dissertation is organized into chronological chapters. Chapter Two, entitled “‘We want the loyalty of the black man’: The empire in crisis,” discusses growing unrest in Britain’s colonial empire following the First World War. The immediate post-war years heralded a colonial crisis for British administrators as strikes, protests, and radical organizations spread throughout the Caribbean. In Barbados, state-sponsored violence and coercion contained the immediate threat of revolution, but postwar unrest made it clear to British officials that new tactics of colonial rule would be required to pacify Caribbean subjects.

Chapter Three, entitled “The Development Cure: New Directions in Trusteeship,” explores British responses to the postwar colonial crisis. As fears of unrest in the Caribbean began to subside, a series of commissions to the region exposed the miserable health and living conditions experienced by the vast majority of West Indian subjects. British policymakers came to believe that in order to repair colonial relationships fractured by war and anti-imperial discourse, they would have to improve the welfare of colonial subjects.

Chapter Four, entitled “Public Health and Elite Power in Barbados,” evaluates struggles between the Barbadian and imperial governments over public health reform in the late 1920s. British pressure to reform Barbadian medical policy sparked extended conflict between white Barbadian elites and imperial officials over how to prevent unrest in the colony. Even as a series of malaria epidemics killed thousands of poor Barbadians and pointed to the desperate need for health reform, white elites refused to concede to British pressure.

Chapter Five, entitled “Warning from the West Indies,” describes how the Colonial Office withdrew from trying to improve colonial welfare and the consequences of this decision. As the Great Depression put further strain on already desperate Barbadian laborers, it became clear that the British government would not come to the colony’s aid. The combination of economic desolation, worsening health conditions, and the circulation of radical pan-African critiques of empire contributed to growing unrest in Barbados as strikes and disorders broke out throughout the British Caribbean.

Finally, Chapter Six, “‘A West Indian Nation is in process of birth’: Caribbean Riots and Policy Revolution,” evaluates the effect of West Indian unrest on British colonial policy and discourses of Barbadian nationhood. Even as war approached in Europe, the actions of frustrated Caribbean workers would force the British government to spearhead an extraordinary transformation in how it governed the empire. In addition to imperial policy, the disturbances would cause discourses on welfare to become integrated in the nationalist claims of aspiring Barbadian politicians.

## Chapter Two

### “We want the loyalty of the black man”: The Empire in Crisis

#### Introduction

On November 11, 1918, the Allied powers agreed to an armistice with Germany in a railcar in the forest of Compiègne, France. With the announcement of the war's end, bells rang across Europe as the devastation of the First World War finally drew to a close. Celebrations also broke out around the world as the colonial subjects of Europe's far-flung empires heard the news. For this was their war too; 650,000 colonial troops fought in European battlefields, with millions more providing the labor, material, and valuable food supplies that kept the war effort going.<sup>1</sup>

Yet for Great Britain and France, the end of the war heralded a colonial crisis. The senseless violence and destruction of the conflict led colonial subjects to mount critiques of European civilization, myths of supremacy, and the entire political-economic order of the West. Furthermore, as the peace negotiations in Paris promised independent states to Eastern European nationalities, colonial people from India to Indochina took seriously Woodrow Wilson's promise of self-determination.<sup>2</sup> Soldiers and sailors of color, according to David Killingray, “laid claim to what they believed to be their earned rights as imperial citizens rather than as mere colonial

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Koller, “The Recruitment of Colonial Troops in Africa and Asia and their Deployment in Europe during the First World War,” *Immigrants & Minorities*, 26:1-2 (2008): 111-133.

<sup>2</sup> Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

‘subjects.’”<sup>3</sup> Despite widespread celebrations of an Allied victory in the streets of London, officials at Whitehall saw the tensions exposed by the war, combined with new ideas of self-determination, as a threat to the future of the British Empire. The immediate postwar years saw revolution in Egypt, riots in India, and disorders in the Middle East, to which the British government responded with violence and repression. As news spread of bloody British reprisals, such as the 1919 Amritsar Massacre in the Punjab, fewer and fewer people believed in Britain’s claim of performing a beneficent “civilizing mission” in the colonies.<sup>4</sup> In fact, even though the terms of the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919 brought the British Empire to its territorial apex, postwar anti-colonial nationalist movements exposed the true fragility of imperial power.<sup>5</sup>

In the Caribbean, as elsewhere in the colonial empire, postwar unrest threatened British imperial hegemony. Yet, the proximity of British West Indian colonies to the United States meant that the region had added significance following the armistice. World War I had shifted global power dynamics, as the United States entered the world stage as a stronger financial and military power. Already a significant presence in the Caribbean due to the construction of the Panama Canal, interventions in Cuba and Haiti, and the philanthropic activities of the Rockefeller Foundation, the postwar years would see the United States take a more expansive role in the region, which troubled policymakers in London who feared national decline.<sup>6</sup> British

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<sup>3</sup> David Killingray, “‘A Good West Indian, a Good African, and, in Short, a Good Britisher’: Black and British in a Colour-Conscious Empire, 1760-1950,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36:3 (2008): 368.

<sup>4</sup> Harald Fischer-Tiné and Michael Mann, eds., *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India* (London: Anthem Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> John Gallagher, “Nationalisms and the Crisis of Empire, 1919-22,” *Modern Asian Studies* 15:3 (1981): 355-368; John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 359-361; Bill Nasson, “War Opinion in South Africa, 1919,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 23:2 (1995): 248-276; Michael Adas, “Contested Hegemony: The Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology,” *Journal of World History* 15:1 (2004): 31-63.

<sup>6</sup> Warren G. Kneer, *Great Britain and the Caribbean, 1901-1913: A Study in Anglo-American Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975); Fitz A. Baptiste, *The United States and West Indian Unrest, 1918-1939* (Mona, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies, 1978); Lester D. Langley, *The banana wars: United States intervention in the Caribbean, 1898-1934* (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 2002); Ronald

West Indian colonies thus became a battleground for Britain's attempts to maintain its status as a great power in the face of rising U.S. influence.

In the years following the war, the Caribbean also became a locus for radical critiques of empire. As it did in other parts of the colonial world, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution provided a source of inspiration for West Indian subjects who had long endured the economic exploitation of white planter elites. Socialist critiques of capitalism and imperialism circulated amongst Caribbean laborers as the war drew to a close. But beyond these class-based explanations of West Indian poverty, the war also fomented new understandings of shared concerns and experiences that existed across transnational and racial boundaries. As the most influential intellectual discourse in this region in the interwar years, Pan-African evaluations of imperialism drew attention not just to the experience of economic exploitation shared by colonial laborers, but to the more specific commonality of black suffering under white rule around the globe. This served as a powerful ideological identification for black populations searching for an explanation of their misery.<sup>7</sup> Often formulated by West Indian intellectuals, pan-African discourse increased during the war years as black soldiers serving in Europe collectively encountered racial discrimination and came to understand a sense of a common racial experience that transcended national and colonial lines. During the course of demobilization, West Indian soldiers radicalized by their wartime experiences brought new ideas and criticism of empire back to their home colonies, where many would become leaders of organized labor or contributors to radical presses.

Returning Barbadian troops brought similar ideas back to "Little England," and the immediate postwar period saw strikes, protests, and unrest in what had previously been considered a peaceful and quiescent colony. Pan-African ideology had great appeal for poor

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Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation, 1918-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Palmer, *Launching Global Health*.

<sup>7</sup> James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*; Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*.

black Barbadians, who had long labored under the racist and exploitative control of white planters. Black Barbadians joined local chapters of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, circulated critiques of capitalism and racism in radical newspapers, and fomented strikes in both the urban and rural spaces of the island. As labor agitation spread, colonial administrators scrambled with how to pacify the region, first quelling the unrest with military force and then turning to economic reforms to pacify restive subjects. Yet in Barbados, British efforts to prevent unrest collided with the historical conservatism and obstinacy of the ruling elites, who balked at outside interference and insisted on dealing with Barbadian problems locally.

The political structure of Barbados, unique in the Caribbean, meant that Barbadian elites responded to the postwar crisis in a very different way from the British government. Rather than contain unrest through amelioration, Barbadian elites placed the island under a state of de facto martial law by allowing the police to search homes without notice or warrants. At the same time, local elites remained confident that the many social controls established in the colony following slavery would limit the scope of radical politics. The immediate post-World War I years in Barbados would highlight the fractures of British colonial rule, as pan-African ideas intersected with increasing dissatisfaction on the parts of the laboring masses, and imperial strategies of achieving peace clashed with local methods of governance.

### **The political, economic, and social order of Barbados**

In Barbados, the volatile postwar conditions intersected with the distinctive power structure and culture of the island. The Barbadian colonial government and law had been created under slavery to serve the needs of the white oligarchy, and the British government had historically allowed Barbados to govern itself. While a British governor oversaw the executive



branch of the government, the Barbadian Constitution restricted his powers over the legislature. This meant that, rather than having executive power to make and enforce policy, governors of the colony spent most of their time negotiating with the local assemblies in order to make them comply with imperial directives. These governors received little supervision from England and were expected to keep the peace by accommodating planter demands, while also protecting the interests of the disenfranchised black Barbadian population.<sup>8</sup> As most governors found, juggling these two competing responsibilities was impossible.<sup>9</sup> The independent Barbados legislature, which consisted of two bodies, the House of Assembly and the Legislative Council, remained primarily concerned with preserving the power of the elite white planter and merchant class of the colony. While the Legislative Council was appointed, members of the House of Assembly were popularly elected. However, onerous income and property qualifications for the franchise meant that the electorate was restricted to approximately two percent of the population, who were the wealthiest inhabitants of the colony.<sup>10</sup> Over the centuries, the conservative Barbadian planters who dominated the legislature had grown accustomed to passing legislation that benefited their interests, without outside interference by the British government.

In addition to legislative control, white elites maintained extraordinary power over black labor in the colony. Following full emancipation from slavery in 1838, the high ratio of freed slaves to land meant that white Barbadian planters were able to maintain an extraordinary level of economic control. Unlike colonies like Jamaica, where freed slaves were able to leave the plantation and settle on public lands, an independent peasantry did not develop in Barbados.

Without access to property for purchase or to public Crown lands, freed Barbadian slaves were

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<sup>8</sup> William A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830-1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 65-79.

<sup>9</sup> Zoe Laidlaw, *Colonial connections, 1815-1845: Patronage, the information revolution and colonial government* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> TNA, CO 28/305, Governor Robertson to Colonial Office, 1926.

forced to persist as laborers on large sugar plantations and remain subject to their former masters.<sup>11</sup> The planters also implemented restrictions on emigration, ensuring that a large workforce was readily available.<sup>12</sup> The steady surplus of labor in Barbados not only kept wages low, but also meant that agricultural workers could be easily replaced. The development of this agricultural proletariat left the Barbadian social system largely unchanged after emancipation.

Barbadian elites used state institutions at every level to force workers to remain on the plantations, allowing white elites to remain after emancipation to oversee their still-profitable estates. Planters implemented a tenancy system to regulate black labor. Elites rented a portion of land to their workers in exchange for their work, which kept laborers in constant debt to the estate. Since the workers also rented their houses from the planters, they lived in constant fear of homelessness. These controls meant that few Barbadian workers could attain the status of a truly free laborer. Workers who moved to different estates would also have to pay fees due to an onerous rent-fine law passed following emancipation.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, planters had the right to evict workers for insubordination as defined by the planter and to send workers to jail for a variety of minor infractions.<sup>14</sup> While emancipation was a dramatic legal break with the past, then, freed laborers remained in a state of economic bondage to their former masters.

Planter control over the legislature, the legal system, land, and wages put black Barbadians, particularly agricultural laborers, in a permanent state of economic and political dependency. In many ways, the power structure in Barbados resembled that of the southern

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<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Mary Butler, *The Economics of Emancipation: Jamaica & Barbados, 1823-1843* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 117, 141.

<sup>12</sup> G. W. Roberts, "Emigration from the Island of Barbados," *Social and Economic Studies* 4 (1955): 249.

<sup>13</sup> Hilary Beckles, *Great House Rules: Landless Emancipation and Workers' Protest in Barbados, 1838-1938* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003), 48-56.

<sup>14</sup> Bentley Gibbs, "Establishment of the Tenantry System in Barbados," in *Emancipation II: Aspects of the post-slavery experience in Barbados*, ed. Woodville K. Marshall (Bridgetown, Barbados: The University of the West Indies and the National Cultural Foundation, 1987), 26-28; Beckles, *Great House Rules*, 70-71.

United States.<sup>15</sup> As Mark Schultz has shown for rural southern whites in Georgia's Hancock County, planters had "direct and personal control over a majority of Hancock's black laborers and answered to no one for their manner of administration." The nature of white supremacy in rural Georgia meant that "powerful white southerners enhanced their own personal power by upholding a decentralized authority structure and a culture of paternalism."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in a small, agricultural colony of Barbados with a sizeable British-descended elite, the personal nature of white rule informed racial order. Even the topography of Barbados assured white control and surveillance over black labor. The entrances to plantation great houses, marked by extraordinarily tall groups of palm trees, could be seen for miles across the relatively flat landscape of the island. Even when agricultural workers returned to their villages, the presence of the plantation was ubiquitous. The island was, itself, a panopticon.<sup>17</sup> As Mary Chamberlain has pointed out, the position of Glendairy Prison, located in the center of the most populous part of the island, was meant to evoke constant surveillance.<sup>18</sup> The political economy and geography of Barbados made for a distinctive pattern of local rule in the British Caribbean, in which a comparatively large creole white class reigned over an impoverished and disenfranchised black workforce.

By the late nineteenth century, a number of labor rebellions had caused most other British West Indian territories to lose their independent legislatures and become Crown Colonies directly administered by Great Britain. However, Barbados was able to retain its relative independence from British oversight. In 1875, the Colonial Office had proposed that Barbados join with the

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 254.

<sup>16</sup> Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195-230.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Chamberlain, *Empire and Nation-Building in the Caribbean: Barbados, 1937-66* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), 112.

neighboring Windward Islands. Most planters and members of the Barbados Assembly vehemently opposed confederation, arguing that imperial officials wished to dismantle their rights and revoke self-government. Anti-confederates launched a campaign against imperial supporters and the Barbadian governor, John Pope Hennessy, who had been appointed to oversee the transition. The governor and pro-confederates attempted to garner working class support for federation, and black Barbadian working classes who viewed the move as a threat to planter control organized in support of it.<sup>19</sup>

By April 1876, tensions had reached a point of open rebellion, as working-class frustrations with white rule combined with desperation over unemployment, hunger, and low wages. During Easter in 1876, hundreds of black laborers revolted for nine days, attacking plantations, destroying planter property, carrying flags, and claiming to be agents of the governor. They saw their actions as the final step that would push Barbados towards confederation, believing that greater imperial control would afford them more opportunities. However, their faith in the empire and its policies faltered when the forces of imperial power stepped in to suppress the uprising. Governor Hennessey sent in the British military to suppress the riots, and the insurgency came to a swift end. The rebellion shook Parliament's attempts to reform the government of Barbados, and it abandoned the confederation idea and replaced the Barbadian governor.<sup>20</sup> Barbados thus remained one of the only British West Indian colonies to resist Crown rule, and the island's elite celebrated its continued self-government.

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<sup>19</sup> Claude Levy, *Emancipation, sugar, and federalism: Barbados and the West Indies, 1833-1876* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1980); George Belle, "The Abortive Revolution," in *Caribbean Freedom*, 183-186; Anthony De V. Phillips, "The Confederation Question," in *Emancipation II*, 75- 81; Beckles, *Great House Rules*, 143

<sup>20</sup> Belle, "The Abortive Revolution," 186-190; Phillips, "The Confederation Question," 81-84; Beckles, *Great House Rules*, 138-156.

As the confederation crisis subsided, Barbadian planters faced a new problem. In the 1870s, the introduction of European subsidized beet sugar to the market dramatically drove down sugar prices on the global market. The dramatic reduction in sugar prices made estates across the West Indies insolvent. As other West Indian colonies faced declining profitability century, estate owners were forced to sell their land to British corporations and absentee owners. In Barbados, by contrast, planters were able to maintain local ownership over estates because they obtained credit locally, rather from metropolitan financiers. Estate owners increasingly relied upon a developing merchant class based out of Bridgetown trading houses, who managed to keep the sugar industry afloat and, therefore, locally-controlled. By the late nineteenth century, Barbados was run by a white oligarchy comprised not only of white planters, but also a powerful “agri-business bourgeoisie” of elite merchants.<sup>21</sup>

While planters and merchants managed to keep Barbadian land and finances under local control, economic depression caused increasing social tensions in the colony. The brunt of the sugar crisis fell upon black Barbadian workers, as planters cut wages and food prices rose. By the 1890s, the crisis had brought widespread unemployment, hunger, and poverty to Barbados. At the same time, dwindling emigration opportunities caused the population density to climb to 1,096 persons per square mile.<sup>22</sup> The impoverished black population of Barbados responded by rioting in the cities and in the countryside, stealing food, setting fires to fields, and demonstrating in the streets. Outbreaks of “potato raids” spread throughout the last two decades of the century, as desperate laborers took matters into their own hands and looted fields for food.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Sleeman, “The Agri-Business Bourgeoisie of Barbados and Martinique,” in *Rural Development in the Caribbean*, ed. P.I. Gomes (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1985), 15-33.

<sup>22</sup> Woodville K. Marshall, “19<sup>th</sup> Century Crises in the Barbadian Sugar Industry,” in *Emancipation II*, 86-92; Beckles, *Great House Rules*, 112; G.W. Roberts, “Emigration from the Island of Barbados,” *Social and Economic Studies* 4 (1955): 267.

<sup>23</sup> Anthony De V. Phillips, *Modernizing Barbados, 1880-1914* (Bridgetown: Ancestor Press, 1996), 7; Marshall, “19<sup>th</sup> Century Crises,” 99; Beckles, *Great House Rules*, 129, 158.

The new pro-empire Secretary of the State for the Colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, took notice of conditions in the West Indies, which he termed “Empire’s darkest slum.” In 1897, as part of his broader plans to strengthen the British Empire, he sent a Royal Commission to the Caribbean to investigate the depression and the sugar crisis. In Barbados, workers organized and sent appeals to the Commission begging for land to alleviate their slave-like conditions and poverty. The commissioners agreed that the laboring masses needed their own land to establish a peasantry and have the ability to grow small food crops. After their departure, though, the recommendations were adopted only sporadically, and mostly in Crown Colonies, where the British government had more direct control over the local government.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, commissioners tended to oppose higher wages for workers, believing that it would cause laziness. Their solution resulted in grants for the planters to revive the sugar industry, doing little to alleviate the problem of Barbadian laborers.<sup>25</sup> Once again, Barbadian planters were able to avoid imperial reforms that threatened the dependency and helplessness of their workforce, and were able to retain control over local affairs.

In addition to the material and structural methods of local rule employed by white Barbadian elites, the Barbadian social and cultural system was a powerful weapon in the arsenal of planter hegemony. Black Barbadians faced both state and personal violence if they became too unruly, and the “carrots” offered by white planters, such as allowing small gardens and grazing properties, could be withheld to punish insubordinate workers. Furthermore, the complex race and class divisions in post-emancipation Barbados not only meant that the large, poor, black workforce suffered racial and economic discrimination at the hands of white elites, but also

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<sup>24</sup> Bonham C. Richardson, “Depression, Riots and the Calling of the 1897 Royal Commission,” *New West Indian Guide* 66:3/4 (1992), 169-191.

<sup>25</sup> Beckles, *Great House Rules*, 159-175; Richardson, *Panama Money in Barbados*, 36, 68.

social separation from the colored and black middle class of the island.<sup>26</sup> The unique level of planter control in Barbados meant that social mobility, already limited in other colonies, was nearly impossible to attain. However, following emancipation an Afro-Barbadian middle class did develop in the island, comprised of the roughly 12,000 free blacks in the colony from the slave period.<sup>27</sup> Members of this class might own small plots of land or a dwelling near Bridgetown, and a select few owned sugar plantations and employed former slaves. As white Barbadian racism increased after emancipation, elite blacks began to embrace their racial identity and tried to fashion a political place for themselves as the voice of the black masses.<sup>28</sup> In 1843, Samuel Jackman Prescod, a colored Barbadian physician, became the first person of African descent to be elected to the Barbados Assembly.<sup>29</sup>

Elite Afro-Barbadians, along with other black West Indian middle classes across the region, challenged the racial hierarchy of British rule by claiming that they were both black and British. Aspiring black and colored professionals adopted the culture and manners of Victorian British respectability, donning “white masks,” in Fanon’s terminology, for social mobility.<sup>30</sup> Yet, no matter the wealth or education attained by Barbadians of African descent, the color bar in the colony prevented full inclusion into the social order. As the black Barbadian politician Grantley Adams would reflect, for the respectable black middle classes of the colony, men and women of color were barred from participation in elite society, such as admission to social clubs. This created “a profound resentment-- all the more potentially dangerous because it is ‘bottled up’-- on the part of the coloured middle classes against the whole social order which keeps them in

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<sup>26</sup> For similar dynamics in other Caribbean colonies, see Brereton, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad*; Bryan, *The Jamaican People*.

<sup>27</sup> Beckles, *Great House Rules*, 58.

<sup>28</sup> Melanie Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies: Free People of Color in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 196.

<sup>29</sup> Beckles, *Great House Rules*, 87.

<sup>30</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

some respects worse off than are the labouring classes.”<sup>31</sup> Not only did Afro-Barbadian middle classes attempt to access the economic and social privileges of white elites, then, but did so by excluding the lower classes. To protect their positions, elite Barbadians of color distinguished themselves from the black masses, and remained more focused on attaining civil and voting rights than with liberating workers from planter control. Indeed, politicians of color like Prescod rejected democracy and universal suffrage, believing with other liberals that only men of means should be able to vote and participate in politics.<sup>32</sup> Like in other West Indian colonies, race and class mattered in influencing allegiances and the scope of political activism.

In Barbados, ruling elites also sought to gain the acquiescence of non-whites through a hegemonic cultural system that disciplined Afro-Barbadians of various backgrounds to seek the perceived rewards of “Britishness.”<sup>33</sup> White elites had long claimed a particularly overblown sense of the colony’s cultural and historical relation to England and the monarchy, an identification that became widespread amongst the island’s residents. For example, when Edward, the Prince of Wales, visited the West Indies in 1920, articles in the *Barbados Globe* used the occasion to boast about the preference of Great Britain for “Little England.” The Crown, the paper argued, had chosen Barbados as the first location Prince Edward’s visit not “due to the accident of geographical position,” but because “the ever British history of the island” placed the colony “in a street all alone among West Indian possessions.”<sup>34</sup> Barbados “alone among British West Indians have known no flag other than the Union Jack,” had “one of the oldest representative Assemblies in the Empire,” and possessed their own “Trafalgar square and a

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<sup>31</sup> TNA, CO 950/597, Memorandum of Grantley Adams to the Moyne Commission, January 16, 1939, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Newton, *Children of Africa*, 197-207, 285-286.

<sup>33</sup> Rush, *Bonds of Empire*. See also Moore and Johnson, *Neither Led Nor Driven*.

<sup>34</sup> “West Indian Seniority,” *Barbados Globe*, April 9, 1920, 1



Nelson statue.”<sup>35</sup> This sense of Barbadian exceptionalism, and its special claim to British heritage, was key not only to elite Barbadian identity, but also to the self-imaginings of the black middle and lower classes.

Schooling was a major site for the communication of British traditions and heritage. Crucially, colonial schools ensconced young West Indians in the values of Christianity, British culture, and the importance of hard work.<sup>36</sup> Primary education was free for Barbadian children, but schools taught little more than basic math and reading. Rather than an opportunity for advancement, then, school was more often “a means of social reproduction.”<sup>37</sup> Barbadian writers like Austin Clarke remember the mythology about British benevolence taught in schools: “The only things we heard in history about the Amurcans were slaves.... It was the Amurcan blacks who were slaves, not the English blacks! England would never allow any of her subjects to be held as slaves.”<sup>38</sup> George Lamming, in his classic novel of Barbadian life, *In the Castle of My Skin*, also wrote about teachers who taught young black children that no one in Barbados had ever been a slave. As schoolchildren learned, “It was in another part of the world that those things happened. Not in Little England.”<sup>39</sup> Lessons such as these taught Barbadian children that the British Empire was just and good, particularly when compared to the United States.

Contrasts between the United States and Britain were common. The British government participated in advertising the comparisons, circulating reports in the colonies stating that there were no Jim Crow laws in the British Empire, and black British subjects became attorneys, chief

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<sup>35</sup> ‘Little England’ in the Atlantic,” *Barbados Globe*, March 5, 1920, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Carl C. Campbell, *The Young Colonials: A Social History of Education in Trinidad and Tobago, 1834-1939* (Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> Bolland, *The Politics of Labour*, 133.

<sup>38</sup> Austin Clarke, *Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack* (Toronto: Canadian Publishers, 1980), 154-155.

<sup>39</sup> George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 57.

justices, and legislators in their home colonies.<sup>40</sup> West Indians seemed to believe in pro-British rhetoric. In 1919, when rumors spread that Great Britain would cede Caribbean colonies to the United States as payment for its war debts, West Indian migrants in Harlem sent an urgent appeal to the Colonial Office. Members of the Barbados Civic Centre in New York wrote as “loyal coloured subjects of Great Britain” to warn the British government about “America’s policy towards the Negro past and present.” Even though West Indians suffered, the petitioners continued, they would rather “bear more of Great Britain's burden than to fall under America’s sovereignty for one day.”<sup>41</sup> West Indian newspapers also compared the records of the United States and Britain on slavery, stating that the British Empire had treated its slaves well and freed them because the British “realized the iniquity of their past acts,” while the United States had to fight a war to end slavery.<sup>42</sup> Faith in the essential justice and goodness of Britain, in particular the British monarch, were widespread. In political meetings during the 1920s, poor Barbadians often expressed confidence that the king would step in to help his colonial subjects if he learned of their suffering.<sup>43</sup> The idea that black West Indians were better off under British rule than black Americans in the United States bred acquiescence amongst Barbadian workers of color.

For the black and colored middle classes, education was the chief avenue for economic and social advancement. Austin Clarke, for instance, was born in a poor village near Bridgetown, but was able to gain middle-class status for himself as well as his family after he won a scholarship to attend secondary school. When he received his scholarship, his mother rejoiced, for “she had at last achieved something beyond the expectations of the village. The village of St.

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<sup>40</sup> TNA, CO 318/378, Note on the Campaign to Secure the Cession of the British West Indies to the United States, 1923.

<sup>41</sup> TNA, CO 318/351/75, Petition from the Barbados Civic Centre, August 9, 1919.

<sup>42</sup> TNA, CO 318/377, “Editorial,” *The British West Indian Review*, April 15, 1923, 11-12.

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, reports on Workingmen’s Association meetings in Barbados in BDA, GH 4/36, Brathwaite to Detective Inspector, June 11, June 12, June 22, and June 24, 1927.

Matthias celebrated with her that day.”<sup>44</sup> Such examples imbued many black families with hope that they, too, could attain social mobility through education. Schools conveyed the idea that “Britishness” had intrinsic value, and adopting the trappings of Britishness meant access to opportunity otherwise unavailable to black Barbadians. By gaining fluency in British history and values through education, Barbadians had the chance to join the ranks of other great Englishmen and become lawyers, doctors, and teachers. Barbadians of color, then, came to see British culture as something that belonged to them, just as it belonged to white Britons in the metropole.<sup>45</sup>

Church was also a central institution that spread British values and culture to black Barbadians. Similar to Jamaica, where Union Jacks hung in Anglican cathedrals and ministers made links between “God and Empire” in sermons, Christian churches taught black Barbadians that the path to both earthly and heavenly rewards lay in the pursuit of respectable Victorian Christianity.<sup>46</sup> In general, planters urged a program of “moral training” for black workers to keep the laboring population quiescent.<sup>47</sup> Barbadian clergy members preached the values of thrift and morality instead of raising wages during times of prosperity, advising workers to sacrifice small luxuries for practical goods. Priests and planters alike believed that workers needed to be civilized, not enriched, and argued that workers needed to change their lifestyles rather than receive higher wages in times of trouble.<sup>48</sup> The interrelated roles of the church and the state in Barbados served as yet another way in which traditional elites maintained control in the colony. Again, black Barbadians adopted British values and culture as a means of advancement, as attending church and leading a “moral” life promised, if not eventual belonging in the middle

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<sup>44</sup> Clarke, *Growing Up Stupid*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Rush, *Bonds of Empire*, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Moore and Johnson, *Neither Led Nor Driven*, 181-182.

<sup>47</sup> Levy, *Emancipation, sugar, and federalism*, 137.

<sup>48</sup> Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 324

class, access to a better afterlife. The emphasis on “respectability” in social interactions meant that outright resistance and disrespect for traditional authority was rare in the island.

By the early twentieth century, the economic and cultural domination of white planter rule began to shift when the United States embarked on a major construction project in Central America. In 1904, when the U.S. renewed construction of the Panama Canal, it recruited workers from all around the world.<sup>49</sup> In particular, the U.S. looked to the British Caribbean, with its English-speaking populations, for a steady labor supply. The U.S. set up its main recruiting station in Bridgetown, causing Barbadians to make up nearly half of the workforce in the Canal Zone. Attracted by wages that doubled what they could make at home, West Indian migrants flocked to Central America to work on the canal.

Between 1904 and 1914, as many as 45,000 Barbadians, or about one-quarter of the island’s population, went to Panama. The remittances that they sent back to the island, as well as the change in demographics, transformed power relations in the colony. Remittances from migrants in Panama allowed many families to purchase their own land and escape direct planter control for the first time, and increased class distinctions amongst the black workers of Barbados. “Panama money” also caused the working masses to become less quiescent, as increased cash reserves allowed feelings of independence for the first time. As a more autonomous class of Afro-Barbadians emerged in the early twentieth century, it increased the class-consciousness of all black Barbadians.<sup>50</sup>

At the same time, encounters with U.S. racism in the Canal Zone caused greater racial awareness for Barbadian migrants. The U.S. classified canal workers through designations of “Gold” and “Silver” rolls, a thinly-veiled system of racial segregation that accorded higher

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<sup>49</sup> Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America’s Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Bonham Richardson, *Panama Money in Barbados 1900-1920* (Memphis: University of Tennessee Press, 1985).

wages to gold employees as well as access to better toilet facilities, clinics, and other amenities.<sup>51</sup> Black West Indians were typically assigned as silver employees, and the affects of lower wages, poorer working conditions, and mistreatment at the hands of white overseers led black workers in the Canal Zone to organize a series of strikes and protests beginning in 1915. Through common experiences with racial discrimination in the Canal Zone, many Barbadians came to see themselves as having something in common with the other African-descended workers in Panama and even around the world.<sup>52</sup> The experience of World War I and pan-African critiques of racism would only further contribute to the transformation of social relations in Barbados.

### **World War I and the Caribbean**

When World War I began in August 1914, both black and white Caribbean subjects clamored for a chance to fight for king and country. According to Anne Spry Rush, many “joined the war effort, at least in part, out of a feeling of loyalty to an idealized British Empire.”<sup>53</sup> Caribbean subjects also viewed enlisting in the war as a chance to prove their equality as Britons and gain more rights for themselves in their home colonies.<sup>54</sup> Initially, the prospect of arming black colonial troops frightened British officials, as it threatened to undermine imperial arguments about racial hierarchy. By 1915, however, the British government made the decision to allow black colonial troops to serve in the army in Europe. Following the announcement, thousands of West Indians flocked to recruitment offices throughout the Caribbean to join the

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<sup>51</sup> Michael L. Conniff, *Black labor on a white canal: Panama, 1904-1981* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985).

<sup>52</sup> Richardson, *Panama Money*, 230-231.

<sup>53</sup> Anne Spry Rush, *Bonds of Empire*, 117.

<sup>54</sup> C.L. Joseph, “The British West Indies Regiment 1914-1918,” *Journal of Caribbean History* 2 (May 1971): 94-124; Anthony De V. Phillips, “‘Go Ahead, England, Barbados is Behind You’: Barbadian Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in 1914,” in *Before and After 1865: Education, Politics, and Regionalism in the Caribbean*, ed. Brian Moore (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1998), 343-350; Glenford Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism: A Social History of West Indians in the First World War* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers/Oxford: James Currey, 2002); Richard Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers in the First World War: Race, Masculinity and the Development of National Consciousness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

war. For the most part, the War Office agreed that the members of these new West India Regiments would be treated and paid the same as white British soldiers. West Indian troops departed their island homes to join other troops on the Western front with the expectation that they would fight as British people in a British war.<sup>55</sup>

Yet, the experiences of black Caribbean soldiers in the war proved disappointing to people that had been raised to believe in their innate Britishness. As Richard Smith has argued, British military officials prevented black soldiers from participating in combat. Furthermore, in order to restore the racial hierarchy implicit in imperialism, military officials portrayed black soldiers' lack of combat experience as proof of their immaturity and childishness.<sup>56</sup> In addition to facing racial discrimination at the hands of white Caribbean officers and English troops, most black West Indians had to perform the most humiliating and menial work in the British army, such as scrubbing latrines. Unequal pay, unfair treatment, and lack of promotions caused serious disillusionment amongst the once-eager recruits. For instance, in August 1918, Barbadian troops stationed in Egypt signed a petition claiming that they were being treated differently than other British regiments. Complaining that they were not allotted a recent pay increase granted to other soldiers, they wrote that they "had all along imagined ourselves to be Imperial troops... We are yet to know whether we are Imperial troops or Colonials; as a matter of fact the War Office has referred to us as 'natives.'"<sup>57</sup> For men raised to believe that they were British, this treatment was humiliating. West Indian soldiers petitioned the War Office repeatedly that they were victims of color discrimination and demanded pay equal to that of other British soldiers.

Following the armistice, this resentment came to a head when all of the British West India Regiments met to prepare for demobilization in Taranto, Italy. There, they were assigned to

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<sup>55</sup> Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism*, 29-40.

<sup>56</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers in the First World War*.

<sup>57</sup> TNA, CO 28/294/24, Petition from the British West Indies Regiment in Egypt, August 2, 1918.

labor details such as unloading ships and other tasks normally reserved for nonmilitary workers. The continuation of discriminatory treatment caused widespread resentment amongst the troops. This culminated on December 6, when the men of the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion mutinied against their officers. At the same time, 180 West Indian sergeants joined together to petition the Secretary of State for the Colonies, writing that the conditions they had observed in France and Italy had not fostered “the most cordial feelings for the Empire in West Indians” and complained that, even though they were “British,” they were not allowed to advance in rank beyond sergeant. According to the officers, West Indians had been fighting in “a World War for Justice and Freedom” yet were not accorded the same rights as other British soldiers.<sup>58</sup> The Taranto revolt provided an outlet for disillusioned soldiers to vent their frustrations.

The mutiny lasted for four days as other West Indian troops refused to work and violence broke out between black West Indian troops and specific officers who were perceived as discriminatory towards black troops. The revolt ended when a machine gun company and British battalion arrived to end the disorder, disbanding the 9<sup>th</sup> British West India Regiment and disarming the rest. Yet, even though the mutiny was short-lived, the feelings of resentment remained amongst West Indian soldiers. Following the revolt, approximately sixty non-commissioned officers in Taranto formed an organization called the Caribbean League to discuss issues of black rights and independence for West Indian colonies.<sup>59</sup> At one meeting, a sergeant reportedly was applauded for stating “that the black man should have freedom and govern himself in the West Indies and that force must be used, and if necessary bloodshed to attain that object.”<sup>60</sup> The soldiers in the League vowed to encourage strikes and disorder upon their return to the Caribbean to fight discrimination and agitate for expanded rights. As the formation of the

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<sup>58</sup> TNA, CO 28/294/24, M. Murphy to Milner, December 6, 1918.

<sup>59</sup> Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism*, 164-167.

<sup>60</sup> BDA GH 3/5/1, Major Maxwell Smith to Major General Thinlier, December 27, 1918.

Caribbean League suggests, some troops came to see themselves as being commonly West Indian during the conflict, which fostered a new sense of nationalism. The experience of war, in particular racial bias and unequal treatment as colonial subjects, had destabilized feelings of Britishness amongst West Indian volunteers and fostered a sense of racial solidarity.<sup>61</sup>

Following the Taranto mutiny, the British government began to take the petitions from West Indian soldiers more seriously. While still denying that West Indian troops were paid differently based on their race, H.T. Allen at the Colonial Office noted that the political implications of the dispute had become “of a sufficiently serious nature to warrant careful consideration.” While “The West Indian negro is in general proud of his British nationality,” he noted, allegations of racial discrimination will “arouse, and has in fact already aroused, great resentment.”<sup>62</sup> This emphasis on instilling a sense of Britishness amongst colonial subjects was key to preserving British colonial power and stability in the Caribbean. Allen recommended that the British government grant the pay increase to West Indian troops in order to stave off further unrest, but this took months to implement.<sup>63</sup>

Restive West Indian regiments continued to pose a worrisome threat to colonial officials as they faced the problem of demobilization. This was heightened by the fact that racial tensions within British regiments continued after the war’s conclusion. In early 1919, for example, a colonel in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Royal Berkshire Regiment in Dublin complained about black West Indian soldiers that had been enlisted in white battalions. He wrote that they would “get hold of white women” and that “The men don’t like going on guard with a lot of niggers,” and demanded that

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<sup>61</sup> W.F. Elkins, “A Source of Black Nationalism in the Caribbean: The Revolt of the British West Indies Regiment at Taranto, Italy,” *Science & Society* 34:1 (1970): 99-103.

<sup>62</sup> TNA, CO 318/348/31, Telegram from Charles O’Brien to Secretary of State for the Colonies, January 28, 1919; Memo from H.T. Allen to Edward Darnley, January 30, 1919.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*



they be demobilized at once.<sup>64</sup> The violent reactions of white Britons to black colonial subjects in their midst threatened to further radicalize the beleaguered West Indian troops as they returned home. The Colonial Office warned West Indian governors that the Caribbean League “has been discussing negro rising” which would begin in Jamaica and spread to the other islands, and they proposed “suddenly falling upon and murdering the whites.”<sup>65</sup> Even as delegates met at Versailles to grant new mandates and territories to the British Empire, the Colonial Office worried that it was on the verge of losing its existing imperial possessions.

### **Pan-Africanism and demobilization**

In the midst of official fears of West Indian unrest, chapters of a new pan-African organization were being established in the Caribbean. Jamaica-born Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which he established in Jamaica in 1914, expanded and began to spread his message of racial unity and black nationalism after he arrived in Harlem in 1916. According to Garvey and other pan-Africanists, the legacy of slavery and racism had created a common experience of suffering for all people of African descent. The UNIA, as it came to be known, espoused a transnational vision of black identity based in the notion that people were not necessarily rooted within specific borders, like the United States, and in fact shared connections and commonalities with others of African descent around the world. Garvey’s philosophy not only espoused racial uplift and redemption, but also pledged to end black suffering by uniting all people of African descent. Garvey’s pan-Africanism, then, not only explained the process of black disempowerment, but also offered the promise of liberation through the Garvey’s promise of forming a black nation in which all members would be equal.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> TNA, CO 318/352/54, Colonel Piers W. North to Macnaghten, January 6, 1919.

<sup>65</sup> TNA, CO 318/349/3, Milner to O’Brien, July 3, 1919.

<sup>66</sup> Martin, *Race First*.

Throughout 1919, the UNIA expanded its membership globally from its headquarters in New York, spreading black nationalist ideas across the Atlantic with its weekly publication, the *Negro World*. Garvey's pan-African ideas were particularly appealing to Caribbean troops. According to Adam Ewing, Garveyism was "a movement that resonated with people's dreams, hopes, and expectations—a movement that encourage them to organize against large and intractable systems of power."<sup>67</sup> Like black laborers of various nationalities who collectively experienced racial discrimination in the Panama Canal Zone, British West Indian troops had come to realize that they shared similar experiences of segregation, humiliation, and poverty with other people of African descent. As soldiers from Barbados, Trinidad, Jamaica, and other colonies met through the experience of war and demobilization, commonalities of race came to transcend divisions along colonial lines.<sup>68</sup> Rather than pledging allegiance to Great Britain or an individual colony, many black West Indians found a powerful new identification that transcended the borders of their home islands as well as the bounds of the British Empire itself. As chapters were founded throughout the West Indies, the rhetoric of the UNIA became a powerful tool to explain black poverty and lack of opportunity for social and economic advancement.

The spread of pan-African ideas added to British anxieties over demobilization. Officials feared that British West Indian troops would spread their dissatisfaction upon returning home, and incite revolts similar to the disturbances at Taranto. Naval commanders suggested dispatching warships to the Caribbean both as a warning to potential agitators and for rapid deployment in case of serious unrest. In January, an officer in the Royal Marine Artillery warned that residents in British Guiana, Barbados, Trinidad, and Jamaica felt "a good deal of uneasiness

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<sup>67</sup> Ewing, *The Age of Garvey*, 4.

<sup>68</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, 162.

as to what will happen when the black troops... are brought back,” and advised that the British government send three cruisers equipped with machine guns to deal with a potentially explosive situation.<sup>69</sup> As soldiers returned home and began to relate their war experiences, British fears of West Indian unrest came to fruition.

In Barbados, the return of troops and seamen from Europe indeed caused increased tension in the colony.<sup>70</sup> In March 1919, as Governor Charles O’Brien relayed to the Colonial Office, returned soldiers caused “a considerable amount of local excitement,” fomenting strikes and urging workers to organize for better conditions. In Bridgetown, “a spirit of disorder and lawlessness was prevalent and was daily increasing,” and some had even attacked policemen with stones.<sup>71</sup> According to O’Brien, returned soldiers were dissatisfied about their treatment at Taranto because they were treated as laborers, not “fighting men who had proved their value” in the war. Police reported “a sullen feeling” among returned soldiers as well as “a section of the coloured people,” augmented by the dissemination of newspapers like the *Negro World*, which “incites hatred of the white race.”<sup>72</sup> Editorials by former soldiers circulated in the local radical press and spread word of the disillusionment experienced by formerly patriotic black West Indians. One such writing reflected that West Indian troops were “indifferently treated, snubbed and misled,” and “kept out of the actual fighting” to be used “for exploitation.” They had fought for the Union Jack in defense of a set of values, “ideals which are at present abstract to us because of our helplessness, ideals we one day will have enforced.”<sup>73</sup> British claims to fairness,

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<sup>69</sup> TNA, CO 318/350/80, Letter from J.R.H. Humphrey, January 14, 1919.

<sup>70</sup> Glenford Howe, “De(re) Constructing Identities: World War I and the Growth of Barbadian/West Indian Nationalism,” in *The Empowering Impulse: The Nationalist Tradition of Barbados*, ed. Glenford Howe and Don Marshall (Barbados: Canoe Press, 2001), 103-132.

<sup>71</sup> TNA, CO 28/295/72, O’Brien to Milner, June 27, 1919.

<sup>72</sup> TNA, CO 318/349/2, O’Brien to Milner, July 14, 1919.

<sup>73</sup> B.W.I. Tommy, “The Justification,” *Weekly Illustrated Paper*, June 21, 1919, 7.

freedom, and justice, once so appealing for black West Indians, had been denied to them, but Barbadian troops returned home determined to access those rights through other avenues.

As soldiers related their experiences to their friends, families, and fellow workers, a feeling of cynicism spread throughout Barbados. According to the governor, agitators were stirring up “strife and raising the racial question.”<sup>74</sup> Demobilized veterans were joined by workers returning from the Panama Canal Zone, who also spoke about their experiences with racism and discrimination abroad.<sup>75</sup> It was apparent that the ideas of pan-Africanism brought home by troops had touched a nerve in the colony. For black Barbadians, trapped within severe systems of economic and social controls, the promise of liberation was alluring.

Pan-Africanism was so powerful for black West Indians because it promised to redeem blackness from the historical stigma and shame of slavery. According to “Blackie,” the pseudonym for a Barbadian pan-Africanist commentator, the black Barbadian laborer was “in a condition similar to that of his slave father” because “he does not reap the fruit of his labour, his master reaps it.” He was compelled to work constantly, in an “unhealthy” environment. “His stomach, his wife, his children and his home are neglected.” Barbados consisted of “half starved, and half-naked Negroes working on the plantations or in other capacities with no account take of their welfare by their masters—employers.” Because of these poor conditions, black laborers endured derision from white elites. Yet, Blackie argued, the nonwhite Barbadian was “a good citizen,” “not lacking in intellectual faculties,” and “patriotic.”<sup>76</sup> That Blackie had to launch such an extended defense of black Barbadians against the charge that they were “good for nothing” shows that black suffering and disenfranchisement in Barbados was not just economic, but also social and psychological. Lured by the appeal of a more just economic system and a world in

<sup>74</sup> TNA, CO 318/348/44, O’Brien to Milner, March 4, 1919.

<sup>75</sup> Richardson, *Panama Money*, 230.

<sup>76</sup> Blackie, “Is the Barbadian Negro Worth Anything?” *Weekly Illustrated Paper*, June 14, 1919, 3.

which black lives were afforded dignity, Barbadian workers embraced the liberatory promises of transnational ideologies in droves during the months following the armistice.

As events unfolded in Barbados, local elites responded to the postwar crisis in their own harsh ways. The reaction of the Barbadian government to the unrest confounded colonial officials, illustrating both the nature of Barbadian elite rule as well as the tensions that marked British power in the colony. In response to the postwar strikes and unrest in the colony, the House of Assembly passed a draconian law unlike any other in the West Indies. The 1919 Peace Preservation Act empowered the Barbados government to “cause a search to be made in any part of the Island for arms and ammunition” without a warrant or notice, seize any arms they found, and impose onerous fines on individuals found with weapons or ammunition. It also added that “Persons may be arrested without warrant by a Constable on suspicion of having or carrying arms or ammunition.”<sup>77</sup> Considering the level of control Barbadian elites maintained over the local government, and its history of using harsh legislation to maintain social and economic hegemony over the labor force, the act was consistent with longstanding elite strategies of rule in the island.

The West Indies Department found the act entirely too severe and feared even worse consequences because of it. While the Colonial Office was keen to quell disorder, it felt that the proposed act went too far. According to H. Grattan Bushe, the Legal Advisor for the Colonial Office who would later govern Barbados, “It provides for the search of houses and persons—summary arrest—and the whole paraphernalia of martial law.”<sup>78</sup> The clerk E.R. Darnley, for instance, conceded that although “recent disorders in Barbados and the repatriation of the troops made a fairly stringent Peace Preservation Act necessary,” the act went too far by “authorizing

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<sup>77</sup> TNA, CO 28/295/20, Report on an Act to amend the Law relating to the carrying and possession of Arms, and for the preservation of the Public Peace, February 22, 1919.

<sup>78</sup> TNA, CO 28/295/20, H. Bushe to Edward Darnley, April 29, 1919.

search before proclamation.”<sup>79</sup> Others stressed that it was “wholly illogical” to allow the government to “search houses and seize arms before it has been made illegal to have arms.”<sup>80</sup>

The Barbados Peace Preservation Act violated the principles of “British justice” that colonial administrators liked to believe were available to all British subjects. Even though the Colonial Office had dispatched warships and troops to the West Indies to violently suppress postwar disorders, it feared that a permanent state of martial law would only exacerbate the grievances of radicalized black workers.

### **The “Red Summer”**

During the summer of 1919, British fears of racial unrest in the colonies came to the metropole with the eruption of racially motivated riots in Cardiff, Liverpool, and other port cities around Britain. The war years had destabilized class relations in Britain, and working-class communities inspired by revolutionary socialism and the breakdown of social hierarchy caused by war had come to adopt force to gain concessions from their employers.<sup>81</sup> Class tensions coincided with racial hostility, as white sailors and dockworkers found it difficult to find work after the cessation of hostilities due to the presence of colonial workers in Britain. Thousands of African and West Indian subjects had remained in Great Britain after the war after serving as seamen and soldiers during the conflict. The presence of such a significant black community in Great Britain for the first time aroused no shortage of ire within the white working-class communities in which these migrants resided, not only because white workers competed with

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<sup>79</sup> TNA, CO 28/295/20, Edward Darnley to Fiddes, May 9, 1919.

<sup>80</sup> TNA, CO 28/295/72, Note from H. Bushe, August 11, 1919.

<sup>81</sup> Neil Evans, “Across the universe: Racial violence and the post-war crisis in imperial Britain, 1919–25,” *Immigrants & Minorities* 13:2-3 (1994): 59-88.

black laborers for jobs, but also for wives: a number of black workers married white British women.<sup>82</sup>

Conflicts between white workers and colonial laborers occurred regularly in 1919, but culminated in a series of major racial riots during the summer. In June, white residents in Liverpool violently attacked black migrants and ransacked their homes and businesses. Similar attacks took place in other port cities. In response to these violent reprisals, African and West Indian subjects residing in Great Britain engaged in riots, strikes, and demonstrations throughout the summer. The unrest, which took place over material concerns like wages and unemployment, also became intertwined with anxieties over who could be considered “British.” As black workers in the metropole laid claim to a British identity through war service and, subsequently, the rights of British citizenship, white workers responded with claims that Britishness meant whiteness.<sup>83</sup> The riots had long-reaching consequences in Britain, as racial stratification hardened within the labor force and discriminatory practices took root that would continue to affect black migrants to Britain for decades to come.<sup>84</sup> The effects of the riots also had far-reaching effects outside the metropole, as news of racial unrest in Britain spread across the Atlantic.

The events of the so-called “Red Summer” were widely reported in the Caribbean, and an awareness of shared racial injustice spread throughout the black diasporic spaces of the British Empire. The Colonial Office scrambled to keep reports about the riots in England from filtering back to the West Indies. Yet, as more seamen were repatriated to the West Indies, they shared

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<sup>82</sup> Carlton Wilson, “Britain’s Red Summer: The 1919 Race Riots in Liverpool,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 15:2 (1995): 25-35

<sup>83</sup> Jacqueline Jenkinson, *Black 1919: Riots, Racism, and Resistance in Imperial Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009).

<sup>84</sup> Laura Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice’: Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

information about the racial violence and disorder spreading around England. Even British administrators were stunned at the content of the riot reports. Colonial Office clerk Edward Darnley, while claiming that “in more cases the negroes were the aggressors,” concluded that white behavior during the riots was of “a very savage character” and warned that they should not send too much information from the reports to the West Indies.<sup>85</sup> Assistant Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, Gilbert Grindle, agreed, writing that the reports were “disappointing” and he “had hoped we might be able to make up a good statement on the coloured riots, but the material is not promising.”<sup>86</sup> The behavior of white Britons towards black seamen was a damning display of British racism, and colonial officials struggled to keep the information away from restive colonies as the riots continued throughout the summer.

In response to the riots as well as to the spread of pan-Africanism, various branches of the British government became involved in the effort to quell racial discontent both at home and in the colonies. In June 1919, the Director of Intelligence for the British government, Basil Thomson, warned of “the growing nationalistic feeling among negroes” and suggested that West Indian governors should report about unrest and rumors about pan-African activity in their colonies. He included a report about various black political activities around the world such as black colonial activists in Paris, W.E.B. DuBois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in the United States as well as the labor and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph's work with American Jews that linked together “Jewish and Negro pogroms.”<sup>87</sup> Thomson's “Report on Revolutionary Movements Abroad” associated pan-Africanism with the spread of socialist ideas across the world, and warned of “a growing

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<sup>85</sup> TNA, CO 318/352/33, Note from Edward Darnley, December 27, 1919.

<sup>86</sup> TNA, CO 318/352/33, Note from Gilbert Grindle, December 29, 1919.

<sup>87</sup> TNA, CO 318/349/3, Basil Thomson to Major Thornton, June 25, 1919.



restlessness among the Negroes not only in the United States but secretly in the West Indies.”<sup>88</sup>

As the British government monitored pan-Africanist movements, the revolutionary tide continued to spread.

In July 1919, disorder broke out in British Honduras in what contemporaries called a “race riot.” The colonial government had instituted a ban against the *Negro World*. In response, a black radical, Herman Hill Cain, had organized a deputation to call for a repeal of the ban, which the governor ignored. Cain’s local radical newspaper carried articles about Garvey and news of the race riots in Liverpool and Cardiff, as well as letters by black West Indian soldiers complaining of their treatment in the war. Censorship of the *Negro World* and news of the British race riots combined with the tensions of demobilization to produce a riot on July 22. Black ex-servicemen, who had been excluded from a social event due to their race, marched through the streets, vandalizing the stores of white elites and breaking windows.<sup>89</sup> They were soon joined by 4,000 working-class black subjects who looted white businesses. The local police force, comprised mostly of black officers, was uncooperative and refused to stop the riot. It was only when a British warship arrived and deployed troops to the colony that the disturbances ceased.<sup>90</sup> As the grievances of returned soldiers combined with a new awareness of racial discrimination spread by the UNIA, colonial officials worried that the disorders would only spread further.

Fears of a “race war” mounted as demobilization continued. A ship’s captain reported to the Colonial Office that white civilians aboard his ship had been assaulted by demobilizing black troops. Warning that a “considerable amount of unrest exists in Trinidad and Barbados,” he

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<sup>88</sup> TNA, CO 318/349/3, “Report on Revolutionary Movements Abroad,” June 18. 1919.

<sup>89</sup> Bolland, *The Politics of Labour*.

<sup>90</sup> W.F. Elkins, “Marcus Garvey, the ‘Negro World,’ and the British West Indies: 1919-1920,” *Science & Society* 36:1 (1972): 64-65.

recommended that the British government station white troops in Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, St. Lucia, and Belize for the next two years.<sup>91</sup> Milner wrote that “there is no doubt that the world-wide economic unrest has spread to those Colonies and it is unfortunately the fact that race antagonism has been fostered by the colour disturbances in Liverpool, Cardiff and London, by the racial troubles in the United States, and by discontent among returned soldiers and repatriated seamen.”<sup>92</sup> Officials worried that, like in the case of British Honduras, black police officers would renounce their loyalty to the Crown in the case of what officials termed a “race war.” According to Grindle, it was “too risky to rely entirely on black police to deal with a racial riot.”<sup>93</sup> Another clerk, J.V. Fiddes, agreed, and like others tried to impress on the Secretary of the Admiralty the need for a stronger naval presence in the Western Hemisphere. According to Fiddes, “In view of existing conditions and the excitable nature of the negro population it is therefore essential that a reserve of white force should, as a precautionary measure be available for some time to come within easy reach of any possible seat of disorder.”<sup>94</sup> It seemed the Colonial Office had concluded that the appeal of pan-Africanism was such that black subjects would now stick together regardless of class or imperial loyalties.

Even conservative Barbados was not immune from the threat of revolution. As riots broke out in British Honduras, Governor O’Brien sent the Colonial Office a flurry of anxious despatches. According to the governor, the return of restive black troops was causing Barbados to experience an “undercurrent of unrest similar to the whole world.”<sup>95</sup> O’Brien warned that drought and the high cost of living could lead to worse unrest, and predicted that the next six months would be a time of anxiety. In fact, he had received a “violent anonymous letter” from

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<sup>91</sup> TNA, CO 318/350/3, Report from Captain W.W. Hope, September 1, 1919.

<sup>92</sup> TNA, CO 318/350/3, J.G.V. Fiddes to the Secretary of the Admiralty, October 22, 1919.

<sup>93</sup> TNA, CO 318/350/3, Note from Gilbert Grindle (emphasis original), October 13, 1919.

<sup>94</sup> TNA, CO 318/350/3, J.G.V. Fiddes to the Secretary of the Admiralty, October 22, 1919.

<sup>95</sup> TNA, CO 318/349/3, O’Brien to Milner, July 16, 1919.

men in four parishes stating that “the jails will be insufficient to hold the people who are in want.”<sup>96</sup> Local forces, he feared, were “inadequate to deal with trouble. Local strikes and discontent existent ... Strongly recommend presence of ships of war Barbados during whole period of ‘demobilization.’”<sup>97</sup>

As unrest continued to affect Barbados during the summer of 1919, colonial officials urged Barbadian elites to adopt reform measures to pacify restless laborers and prevent unrest. The Colonial Office sent numerous dispatches to Governor O’Brien, asking him to pressure Barbadian employers to mollify angry laborers by raising wages and reducing unemployment. Privately, Colonial Office clerks attributed the problems in Barbados to planter greed. As one official noted, “Cheap labour has been the bane of the W.I. planter” and they would need to modernize and start paying higher wages immediately, or see the unrest continue.<sup>98</sup> Yet, the Colonial Office did not have the power to force Barbadian planters to increase wages, so Governor O’Brien was tasked with persuading white elites to lower the unemployment rate in the island to stave off future disorder. This he dutifully attempted in July 1919. The content of the meeting reveals the frustration experienced by British governors in general in attempting to relay imperial advice and directives to Barbadian elites.

During the meeting, O’Brien warned planter and merchant elites that a “crisis” was inevitable, due to a “very great change that has come over the world with the present war.” Returned soldiers added to the discontent, as veterans vented their frustrations “regarding their treatment at Taranto and feeling that they are not appreciated by the colony,” as well as resentment about the treatment of black subjects in Liverpool and Cardiff. In particular, he warned that the Caribbean League meant “to stir up the coloured man against the White in one of

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<sup>96</sup> TNA, CO 318/349/2, O’Brien to Milner, July 14, 1919.

<sup>97</sup> BDA 3/5/1, O’Brien to Milner, July 21, 1919.

<sup>98</sup> TNA, CO 318/348/44, Note by Edward Darnley, March 28, 1919.

the West Indian Colonies,” and he feared that “some of our people have been in close contact with it.” The unrest, O’Brien stressed, arose from the “belief among the working class that they have not been allowed to share the return of good times in the ratio of labour in other places.” The governor warned that he had already received threatening letters claiming that the working classes were going to seize what they wanted. Even historic Barbadian attachments to the monarchy were beginning to fray, he claimed, as during rehearsals for peace celebrations someone had said “To ----- with the King I am done with him.”<sup>99</sup>

In order to prevent major disturbances, O’Brien stressed that employers would need to grant “concessions” to their workers. “Labour through the World is demanding and obtaining a larger share of the profits in all industry and neither you nor I can stop it whatever our feelings or prejudices.” He encouraged them to “employ every employable man, woman and child,” assist in planting food, and think about how to keep their laborers as busy as possible.”<sup>100</sup> However, Barbadian planters ignored O’Brien’s advice. Confident in their hegemony over Barbadian labor, white Barbadian elites continued to pay their workers starvation wages even as strikes and riots broke out in neighboring islands. O’Brien, like scores of British governors before him, was helpless to override the decision of the planters.

### **Focus on social conditions**

The postwar unrest in Barbados and the wider Caribbean demonstrates how pan-African ideas and the spread of UNIA branches intersected with widespread economic misery in the West Indies. British administrators realized that force alone would not be enough to quell the dissatisfaction of Caribbean subjects with British rule. When Barbadian planters ignored imperial advice about how to pacify poor workers, British officials worried that anti-colonial sentiments

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<sup>99</sup> TNA, CO 318/349/53, Charles O’Brien address to Barbadian planters, July 30, 1919.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

would become more widespread. Although most radical criticism in Barbados was directed at local elite rule, some Barbadians began to blame the British Empire for the social and economic problems in the island. One editorial declared that “British policy in the West Indies has failed to develop these colonies to the standards obtaining politically, socially and industrially in the self governing dominions.”<sup>101</sup> The claims of British neglect made by Barbadian and other West Indian radicals led colonial officials to conclude that these issues had to be addressed to prevent further disorder. In an attempt to get to the roots and quell discontent in the Caribbean, the British government began to focus on social conditions in the West Indies.

The Colonial Office circulated a request for information about the state of housing, wages, education, and living conditions in the Caribbean. The Barbados report, submitted by John Bovell, the Director of Agriculture for Barbados, was a damning indictment of the colony’s unequal power structure. It revealed a society of poor, exploited laborers ridden with disease, starvation, and poverty. Bovell described the system of disempowerment in the colony, in which planters cut pay when laborers did extra work to earn more money. This meant that laborers had a tendency to “work as seldom as possible, and to perform their work as badly as possible.” In addition to these reasons, he said that widespread disease, particularly hookworm, prevented many laborers from doing their work. He wrote that the poor classes were “in a state of semi-starvation due to the want of sufficient food” and that desperate peasants stole food and livestock prevalently.<sup>102</sup> Even though Bovell sympathized with the planter class and agreed with contemporary assumptions of the inherent indolence of the black West Indian laborer, his report was unable to hide the wretched conditions that so many Barbadians suffered.

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<sup>101</sup> “Unaware of Our True Value,” *Weekly Illustrated Paper*, October 18, 1919.

<sup>102</sup> TNA, CO 318/349/53, Report by John Bovell, September 15, 1919.

When the report reached the Colonial Office, despite his differences with the planters, O'Brien wrote a hot rebuttal to defend Barbadian elites, arguing that as a whole, they "treat their labourers with fairness." O'Brien also launched into a defense of the unsanitary and overcrowded conditions that laborers faced. Overcrowded homes, he wrote, were justified because in Barbados, people stayed outside all day and only used their homes for sleeping. He argued as well that residents did not require as much clothing as in other places and that they only worked in old clothes. Regarding wages, he noted that, while laborers could probably use better wages, the "Barbadian coloured labourer is patient and apathetic, and one drawback is that an increase in wages in many cases leads to shorter periods of labour, the labourer preferring his ease and a bare sufficiency to a fuller life of labour."<sup>103</sup> O'Brien's unsympathetic and racist portrayal of labor relations in the colony shows how, despite his problems with the planters, he continued to uphold their interests.

In contrast to O'Brien, other British administrators in Barbados expressed dismay at the conclusions of the report. The Colonial Secretary, Francis Jenkins, sent a private note to the governor relaying his concerns about the high food prices in the colony. Jenkins wrote, "I am forced into the view which is a most unpopular one to give expression to here. Viz.- The view that the worker in Barbados is not getting an adequate wage." He noted that food prices had gone up 100 percent and clothing 300-400 percent, but wages were not keeping pace. If things continued as they were, Jenkins warned, "it seems to me that trouble must come." Jenkins came to believe that, in this new era of anti-colonial nationalism and worker unrest, such conditions were not sustainable if the British Empire wished to endure. Furthermore, he took the opportunity to complain about the problems with local rule and planter obstinacy. Despite the representative government in Barbados, he lamented, "no member of the House of Assembly can

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<sup>103</sup> TNA, CO 318/349/53, O'Brien to the Colonial Office, October 13, 1919.

be found to champion the cause of a large section of the population. It is not fair or right that the Governor should have to take up such a case and, if the House was really representative he would not have to do so.”<sup>104</sup> The constitutional structure of Barbados meant that the only advocate for the working masses was a British governor who harbored derision for black laborers and had no power to enforce imperial policy.

However, the former Colonial Secretary, T.E. Fell, warned Jenkins “never to give utterance to such views as these in public.” If he did so, it would “be stirring up trouble, setting class against class and being told to ‘remember Pope Hennessy.’” This admonishment was a powerful one for Barbadians. John Pope Hennessy, the reformist governor of Barbados during the Confederation Riots, was used to remind administrators of the dangers of change.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, Jenkins was very keen to keep his ideas private, demonstrating the Barbadian government’s fear of the populace seizing any perceived sympathy by a government official as tacit approval of reform. Jenkins’s utterances to the governor would have been considered inflammatory if shared publicly. O’Brien, too, complained of his position in private correspondence with the Colonial Office. While he wanted to prevent unrest, he believed that he was in a quandary, since he had been repeatedly warned that if a governor were to address the labor question publicly, it would result in “the uneducated coloured people taking the view that it is a license for them to break out and take all they want.”<sup>106</sup> In many ways, then, British power was limited in Barbados. British colonial officials on the ground had to strike a very fine balance between appeasing obstinate white elites and managing an impoverished, desperate population seemingly on the verge of revolt. The tensions caused by negotiating between these competing groups would only increase as postwar unrest continued.

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<sup>104</sup> BDA, GH 3/5/1, Francis Jenkins to Charles O’Brien, August 31, 1919.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> TNA, CO 318/349/53, O’Brien to the Colonial Office, October 13, 1919.

## Fears of “race war” from the Colonial Office

Fears of West Indian racial disturbances continued throughout the autumn of 1919. When Colonel Unsworth of the Salvation Army visited the Colonial Office to report on his recent trip to the West Indies, he warned British officials that he was “pessimistic” about the situation there because the “feeling of black against white is growing more intense all the time.” Unsworth attributed the causes to low wages, since laborers made about a quarter in their home colonies what they could make in locations like Cuba.<sup>107</sup> Grindle agreed that the threat of trouble was real and that there was no “special remedy for it.” The Colonial Office could try to prevent disorder, improve conditions, and “be careful over questions of race, but nothing we can do will alter the fact that the black man has begun to think and feel himself as good as the white.”<sup>108</sup> Assertions of equality, inspired by pan-African ideology after the war, posed a serious threat to the hierarchical structure of colonialism.

In particular, the West Indies Department grew concerned with the lively public discourse and printed materials that were spreading pan-African ideology and anti-colonial sentiments throughout the West Indies during the course of mobilization. Some West Indian governments had already passed laws to restrict the freedom of the press. For instance, British Honduras had long enforced legislation to suppress the *Negro World*, though copies of the publication were still smuggled into the colony.<sup>109</sup> Colonial officials encouraged a more comprehensive move to prohibit incendiary literature in the Caribbean, warning that problems with “mischievous publications” would continue spreading throughout the West Indies.<sup>110</sup> In early September, Lord Milner wrote to the West Indian governors that due to unrest amongst

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<sup>107</sup> TNA, CO 318/352/8, Unrest in West Indies, October 22, 1919.

<sup>108</sup> TNA, CO 318/352/8, Note from Gilbert Grindle, October 22, 1919.

<sup>109</sup> W.F. Elkins, “Suppression of the ‘Negro World’ in the British West Indies,” *Science & Society*, 35:3 (1971): 344-347.

<sup>110</sup> TNA, CO 318/349/2, Note from Edward Darnley, August 22, 1919.



“the coloured population of the West Indies,” he approved “the exercise of stricter control over the press by means of legislation giving power to suppress any publications of a character either seditious or calculated to incite to crime.”<sup>111</sup> Even though the British government boasted of a liberal vision for its empire, the deployment of British warships in the Caribbean and restriction of free speech pointed to the repressive nature of colonialism.

When the Colonial Office urged the Barbados government to censor the *Negro World*, the House of Assembly refused to consider such legislation. Dispatches from Governor O’Brien shed light on elite’s logic in this circumstance. In September, O’Brien informed the Colonial Office that the law against seditious publications “would have no chance of acceptance in the House of Assembly.”<sup>112</sup> He conceded that “unrest exists among the coloured population of Barbados” and “the returned soldiers of the B.W.I. Regiment and the repatriated coloured seamen form generally speaking a discontented element.” Yet, despite the unrest, local elites were confident that British cultural hegemony remained strong in Barbados. Written petitions and complaints he received began by stating the services they offered to “King and Country” of which “they appear to have an altogether exaggerated idea.” As the governor explained, “This confirms my belief that the general atmosphere of Barbados is not favorable to revolt. The better class coloured man is too deeply religious and loyal to the Crown to favour concerted measures against authority.”<sup>113</sup> Both the governor and Barbadian elites were confident that the appeal of Britishness would always be more powerful than an organization like the UNIA. Ironically, then, repressive Barbados was one of the few West Indian colonies in which the *Negro World* was freely circulated.

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<sup>111</sup> BDA, GH 3/5/1, Milner to O’Brien, September 10, 1919.

<sup>112</sup> TNA, CO 318/349/54, O’Brien to Clementi, September 24, 1919.

<sup>113</sup> BDA, GH 3/5/1, O’Brien to Milner, October 13, 1919.

In Barbados, unlike other British West Indian colonies, grassroots political activity was slow to develop. Activists in British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica had begun forming reform organizations in the late-nineteenth century, which ranged from moderate middle-class associations to labor unions. The Trinidad Workingman's Association (TWA), for example, was founded in 1897, followed soon by other labor and pan-African organizations. Political organizations in these colonies often focused on the problems with Crown Colony government, critiques that increased after the war as West Indian people made increasing demands for self-government.<sup>114</sup> Barbados, by contrast, had a representative government, though it remained under the control of the planter and merchant oligarchy. While some moderate franchise reforms were passed in the nineteenth century, the system of economic and political domination in Barbados stymied the development of organized, grassroots political activity amongst disenfranchised Barbadians. Nevertheless, the experience of black Barbadian soldiers in the war had politicized returning troops as well as urban workers exposed to pan-African discourse. As a result, a number of small radical presses proliferated in Barbados in the years following the war, which spread the messages of Garvey and news of his followers to the literate working populations of the island.<sup>115</sup>

Barbadian radical papers reprinted news about UNIA branches around the world, and other West Indian Garveyites wrote to relay their activities. A St. Vincentian organizer, for example, reported that although the government had blocked circulation of the *Negro World*, the almost 500 local UNIA members there were continuing to fight against those who would “stop the progress of us, poor and innocent Negroes.” Despite the efforts of governments everywhere,

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<sup>114</sup> Bolland, *The Politics of Labor*, 133-140.

<sup>115</sup> Elkins, “Suppression of the ‘Negro World.’”

“the right of the Negroes will overcome the might of the whites.”<sup>116</sup> When British Guiana instituted a ban on the *Negro World*, the *Weekly Illustrated Paper* argued that Garvey’s paper “should be read and reread,” maintaining that if reading the paper led to death, then “martyrs should be found ready and willing to be sacrificed in this good cause.”<sup>117</sup> Pan-African newspapers accused the British government of trying to sabotage and undermine Garveyism worldwide, decrying British censorship of the *Negro World* in Africa and British assistance to the United States government in order to undermine UNIA activities in New York.<sup>118</sup> Knowledge of the actions and struggles of other UNIA members gave Barbadian pan-Africanists a keen sense that their movement was part of something bigger than one colony. A letter from “Blackie” in the *Weekly Illustrated Paper* objected to press statements that the launching of the Black Star Line, Marcus Garvey’s steamship company meant to foster trade amongst black businesses and communities worldwide, was an important day for black Americans. Instead, he argued, the event was also important to Barbadians as a “red letter day in the history of our race.”<sup>119</sup>

The circulation of pan-African ideas in Barbados and the wider Caribbean frightened the Colonial Office, who expressed consternation when the Barbadian government declined to adopt press censorship. Allowing Barbadians to openly read and circulate the *Negro World*, in addition to other pan-African papers, made it much harder for the Colonial Office to regulate the circulation of Garvey’s ideas in the wider Caribbean. Indeed, while Trinidad blocked importation of the *Negro World*, sailors continued to bring copies ashore which were easily obtained in Barbados.<sup>120</sup> Grindle wrote that there was “rather more risk of trouble in Barbados than the local

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<sup>116</sup> R.E.M. Jack, “The St. Vincent Government Suffers from Cold Feet,” *Weekly Illustrated Paper*, October 12, 1919.

<sup>117</sup> “West Indian Paper Protests Against Attempt to Suppress the Negro World,” *Weekly Illustrated Paper*, October 11, 1919.

<sup>118</sup> “Britain’s ‘Underground Railway,’” *Barbados Times*, October 23, 1920.

<sup>119</sup> “The Black Star Steamship Line is Attracting Attention in the West Indies,” *Weekly Illustrated Paper*, October 11, 1919.

<sup>120</sup> TNA, CO 318/356, J.R. Chancellor to CO, November 30, 1920.

people realize. The white class there does not appreciate the altered tone of the black man, and is over-confident.”<sup>121</sup> Despite the growing popularity of the UNIA in Barbados, Governor O’Brien assured the Colonial Office that the publication did not cause “actual crime” though the “inflammatory headlines may cause some excitement” among the “uneducated readers of criminal instincts.”<sup>122</sup>

Colonial Office warnings of Caribbean unrest came to fruition when strikes spread throughout Trinidad in December 1919. Beginning with a dockworker’s strike, the disturbances soon spread to the entire colony as workers in other industries joined the strikes in demonstrations and marches through the streets. Just like in British Honduras, the British government responded by deploying imperial troops to arrest demonstrators and put down the unrest with force.<sup>123</sup> After the Trinidadian government arrested nearly 100 strikers and instituted a renewed campaign of repression, the strikes eventually unraveled. Even though the government had succeeded in halting the disturbances, the unrest in Trinidad caused deep anxiety for the British government as well as neighboring West Indian states.

British officials worried that, in light of the miserable wages earned by most West Indian workers, the unrest would continue. In particular, concerned Colonial Office clerks warned that Trinidad’s unrest could spread to Barbados, “where industrial conditions are far from satisfactory.”<sup>124</sup> The West India Office, a pro-planter political group in Great Britain, sent an urgent message to the Barbadian legislature warning that disorders could erupt at any time. Algernon Aspinall, the director of the Office, warned “Trinidad disturbances causing grave anxiety, from private information received we consider it very desirable to anticipate similar

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<sup>121</sup> TNA, CO 318/350/3, Note from Gilbert Grindle, October 13, 1919.

<sup>122</sup> BDA, GH 3/5/1, O’Brien to Milner, October 13, 1919.

<sup>123</sup> Bridget Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad: 1783-1962* (Kingston: Heinemann, 1981).

<sup>124</sup> TNA, CO 318/352/20, Minute by Edward Darnley, December 13, 1919.

trouble Barbados by increasing wages generally otherwise Government may insist if strikes break out.”<sup>125</sup> These trepidations about disorder spreading to Barbados and other colonies prompted the Colonial Office to send a severe dispatch to all West Indian governors in mid-December. The document warned that wages were too low across the region and that “this is one of the chief causes of widespread unrest. Please consider what attitude you will adopt in the event of its becoming necessary to intervene in strikes or labour troubles.”<sup>126</sup> Separately, Leo Amery, the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, wrote to Governor O’Brien and urged him to do anything possible to increase the laborers’ wages at least to pre-war levels.<sup>127</sup>

Even though his summer pleas had been ignored, O’Brien once again met with leading planters and merchants of the colony to relay the contents of the telegram. The governor urged Barbadian elites to take the Colonial Office’s advice immediately instead of waiting for disturbances to break out as they had in Trinidad. Indeed, he argued, the success of labor organization in Trinidad was partly due to “Barbadian born” migrants, so the unrest could easily spread to Barbados. At the same time, he cautioned that the constabulary and Defence Force were not large enough to be stationed throughout the island in the case of more serious unrest. Rather than wait for a cataclysm, he advised them to “put the matter on a sound business footing.” O’Brien reminded the planters that they had experienced prosperity during the war and it was not unreasonable that laboring classes wanted some part of that.<sup>128</sup>

Despite the events in Trinidad, Barbadian elites responded negatively to his address. C.E. Gooding, a planter, objected to the contention that Barbadian laborers were being paid less than before the war, and in fact, he argued that they were paying laborers more than ever. Personally

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<sup>125</sup> TNA, CO 318/351, Algernon Aspinall to Edward Darnley, December 12, 1919.

<sup>126</sup> TNA, CO 318/352/18, Telegram from Milner to West Indian governors, December 16, 1919.

<sup>127</sup> BDA, GH 3/5/1, Amery to O’Brien, December 23, 1919.

<sup>128</sup> BDA, GH 3/5/1, Address by O’Brien to Barbados employers, December 23, 1919.

he “saw no signs of discontent” amongst the laborers. G.L. Pile, another planter, agreed that Barbadian workers were too placid to revolt, and blamed laborers for their own poverty. He argued that plantation workers would only work four days a week when they had the opportunity to work five or six and make more money, so “people would not work for as much money as they could earn.”<sup>129</sup> The merchants in attendance also maintained that they had been increasing wages. F.O. Swan argued that the proof was that “many more ‘poor’ people travelled by train way now than formerly and that hungry people did not spend their money in train fares.” The planter E.W. Mahon agreed, arguing that Barbadian workers wasted what little income they had. What “the labouring population insisted upon was their leisure” and if they increased wages then they would “take their leisure.” According to Mahon and the other Barbadian elites, “They would be willing to forego the balance of their possible earnings for their holiday.”<sup>130</sup>

Thus even when presented with the reality of disorder in other colonies and pleas from the Colonial Office, Barbadian elites could not be persuaded to attend to the miserable conditions of the island’s poor. They dispelled blame from the outmoded and inefficient economic system in Barbados that profited only from the exploitation of the colony’s most vulnerable subjects. Ultimately, white planters remained more concerned with maintaining a hold on their own wealth than with ameliorating the conditions that lead to working-class discontent, and preferring to use the resources of the state to maintain order. Furthermore, Barbadian elites refused to accept British advice in dealing with potential unrest as a matter of principle. White elites viewed outside interference in their affairs with deep suspicion, and remained more concerned with keeping the British government out of local rule than the potential of class and racial unrest.

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<sup>129</sup> BDA, GH 3/5/1, Minutes by Colonial Secretary (emphasis original), December 23, 1919.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

## Continued pan-African activity

As white Barbadian elites dismissed threats of unrest, Colonial Office officials grew increasingly concerned with the revolutionary potential of West Indian laborers. The power of transnational, pan-African thought particularly worried the British government. As Grindle wrote to Winston Churchill, the Secretary of War, “unfortunately there are other and graver causes of unrest.” Referring to UNIA, he decried “the movement which is taking place among all the coloured races, and in particular of the organized effort to stir up racial feeling in the coloured populations of the U.S. of America. It is understood that several W.I. negroes are among the organizers of the movement in the U.S., and there is evidence that they are making efforts to extend it to the colonies whence they came.” The political appeal of UNIA and other pan-African groups was serving as a powerful uniting force for black West Indians, as the ideology of black internationalism seemed to offer a more promising alternative for black advancement than blind British loyalty. West Indian unrest, Grindle warned, had become about “their race and colour” and “it can but be feared that their presence will make any W. Indian riot of the future far more formidable” than in the past.<sup>131</sup>

The continued spread of UNIA branches in Barbados seemed to confirm Colonial Office fears. The war had increased the cost of living in Barbados, and as wages remained stagnant, UNIA membership swelled to over 1,800.<sup>132</sup> Barbadian UNIA leaders emphasized the dignity and value of African-descended people, and urged black islanders to unite and press for better wages. The Barbadian police extensively reported on the meetings, which were held both in Bridgetown as well as in outlying districts. According to detectives, many speakers tried to foment racial tension and referred to whites in bitter terms like “bloodsucking capitalists, who try

<sup>131</sup> TNA, CO 318/350/91, Gilbert Grindle to Winston Churchill, December 19, 1919.

<sup>132</sup> David Browne, *Race, Class, Politics and the Struggle for Empowerment in Barbados, 1914-1937* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002), 90.

to get their labor for little or nothing.”<sup>133</sup> While pressing for higher wages was important, UNIA had wider appeal for black Barbadians than simply explaining economic suffering.

As the movement gained traction in 1920, the language of global racial unity under the leadership of Garvey remained a continual theme. UNIA meetings around the island emphasized the connection between Barbadians and a black nation that transcended the bounds of colony and language. As Reverend Cragwell, a Mission minister from Shop Hill, St Thomas, declared, Marcus Garvey “brought us a flag as a race... God gave us Africa. Our forefathers was stolen and brought out as slaves and our good land Africa was stolen from us.” He finished by promising them that justice and equality awaited if they would only unite, as “our destiny lies in our own hands.”<sup>134</sup> Again, this imagined tie between black Barbadians and people of African descent all over the world was empowering. “He is the leader of four hundred million negroes” and “He has given us pluck to face any white man” were common refrains at Barbadian meetings.<sup>135</sup> Racial pride was also central to UNIA language, as speakers declared that “the time is coming when the whites will wish they were black. The negroes are knowing themselves.”<sup>136</sup> More than anything, UNIA expressed that there was no shame in being black, an empowering message for black Barbadians who had long been told by local white elites that they were inferior, lazy, weak, and helpless. As Barbara Bush has argued, “Garvey spoke in a language that the poor understood, using the symbolism of Ethiopia as the source of liberation for Africans from Babylonian repression and as the cradle of an independent and proud culture.”<sup>137</sup>

In August 1920, the Barbadian UNIA held its largest event to date at the Olympic Theatre Hall in Bridgetown. Presided over by the Barbadian UNIA leader Israel Lovell, nearly 800

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<sup>133</sup> TNA, CO 318/355, Report by C.H.R., Acting Inspector General, Barbados Police, June 22, 1920.

<sup>134</sup> TNA, CO 318/355, Lance Corporal J. Jones to Captain J.R. Anderson, August 3, 1920.

<sup>135</sup> BDA, GH 4/36, R. Skeete to Inspector of Police, December 30, 1929.

<sup>136</sup> BDA, GH 4/36, R. Skeete to Detective Inspector, December 26, 1929.

<sup>137</sup> Barbara Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919-1945* (London: Routledge, 1999), 14.



attended the meeting held under the banner “A Race for a Continent and a Continent for a Race.” Lovell proclaimed that it was “time that every negro should rise to a sense of his condition” rather than letting things remain the same and accepting low wages and bad treatment.<sup>138</sup> Other speakers discussed “their dear old home in Africa” and urged Barbadians to unite as one people. “People in other parts of the world have been united together, and we at Barbados can be united also.”<sup>139</sup> As Adam Ewing has shown for Garveyism more broadly, local followers of the movement felt that “their often mundane and limited political efforts were joined to a vast, expanding, and dazzling project of diasporic connectivity and international organization.” The appeal of Garveyism was that it “connected otherwise isolated efforts within a sophisticated network of communication.”<sup>140</sup> The imagined diasporic ties that linked UNIA members to movements around the globe were influential motivators for poor Barbadians, who rarely traveled outside the confines of their village.

British officials continued to view the growth pan-African organizations with apprehension, and were continually confounded by the reactions of white Barbadian elites to local unrest. When responding to the widespread power of UNIA and the threat of postwar unrest more broadly, the actions of Barbadian elites were contradictory. In some ways, local elites seemed unconcerned with the threat of unrest, and refused to take restrictive measures like implementing censorship laws against radical newspapers or raising wages to pacify restive laborers. Yet, at the same time, the legislature adopted one of the strictest laws in the British Caribbean, the Peace Preservation Act. The seemingly inconsistent actions of local white elites in response to postwar disorder reveal a number of characteristics regarding power relations in the island colony.

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<sup>138</sup> BDA, GH 3/5/4, Report by Lce/Corpl J. Jones, August 3, 1920.

<sup>139</sup> TNA, CO 318/355, Lance Corporal J. Jones to Captain J.R. Anderson, August 3, 1920.

<sup>140</sup> Ewing, *The Age of Garvey*, 5.

Social controls in Barbados meant that local authorities were confident in the ultimate “Britishness” of black workers. The Solicitor General H.W. Reece, the only member of African descent in the Barbadian legislature, went so far as to encourage the circulation of the *Negro World* in the colony. According to Reece, “it is well for the Barbadian Coloured Man to see the disabilities of the Negro in America as he should be the better contented with his position here.”<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, officials understood that even if laborers dabbled in some pan-African thought, the deep cult of imperial allegiance, which was so entrenched in “Little England,” would be difficult to overcome. Governor O’Brien, for example, praised “the loyalty and good behavior of the Barbadian coloured man” whose sense of religion and “wonderful personal loyalty to the Crown all constrain him to be less the tool of the agitators.” According to the governor, “though they may get off a lot of hot air and seditious things may be said and disparaging remarks about the white many, frequently such meetings will end with ‘God save the King’”<sup>142</sup>

The need to balance oaths to the king and Christian belief with radical thought presented frustrating difficulties for UNIA leaders. At one point, O’Brien relayed merrily to the Colonial Office that a recent meeting did not “point to a dangerous association so far as Barbados is concerned. The opening hymn [‘From Greenland’s Icy Mountains’] is delightfully appropriate to a tropical land.” Indeed, for any meeting to be successful there it had to have hymns and prayer and conclude with the national anthem. As O’Brien continued, implementing prayer and an expression of loyalty to the king “discounts the work of agitators in a considerable degree.”<sup>143</sup> Local elites understood the cultural particularities in Barbados that made it difficult for radical movements to take hold.

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<sup>141</sup> TNA, CO 318/355, O’Brien to Milner, July 19, 1920.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> TNA, CO 318/355, O’Brien to Milner, August 10, 1920.

Most importantly, the economic and legal structure of the colony restricted the radical potential of black workers. Barbadian elites maintained such tight and personal control over land and labor in Barbados that workers faced serious deterrence when it came joining radical groups. As UNIA gained popularity, Barbadian planters were using their considerable power to undermine the movement. Barbadian laborers, in particular plantation workers, were prevented from attending the meetings through strategies of employer intimidation and threats of lost wages. Furthermore, white Barbadian elites maintained their power through the use of coercive measures and surveillance. The Barbados government passed legislation that gave the police a 45 percent pay increase, meant to ensure the loyalty of black police officers to the local state.<sup>144</sup> Additionally, in early 1921, the Barbados legislature renewed the 1919 Peace Preservation Act that allowed the search of homes and individuals without warning, which caused all Barbadians to live under the fear of arrest.<sup>145</sup> Planters remained confident that the threat of police action, state repression, and control over land and wages would restrict the radical potential of pan-African thought.

Initially, the Colonial Office feared the cavalier attitude of Barbadian elites towards the UNIA. The Colonial Office remained concerned that the *Negro World* and the NAACP's *Crisis* were widely read and circulated amongst educated black Barbadians, and then orated to laboring populations at UNIA meetings.<sup>146</sup> According to Charles Darnley, "there is always danger about an organisation controlled, even imperfectly, by fanatically anti-white negroes in the U.S."<sup>147</sup> Eventually, though, Colonial Office fears of the UNIA began to decline as well as the actions of West Indian colonial states began to take a toll on the movement. Nonetheless, Garvey's

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<sup>144</sup> TNA, CO 318/355, O'Brien to Milner, July 19, 1920.

<sup>145</sup> TNA, CO 28/299/87, O'Brien to Churchill, August 23, 1921.

<sup>146</sup> "Editorial," *Barbados Weekly Herald*, June 22, 1920.

<sup>147</sup> TNA, CO 318/355, Note from Edward Darnley, September 13, 1920.

movement would continue to have a marked presence in the political consciousness of many Barbadians and continue to influence working-class organizations in the years to come.

## **Conclusion**

By 1921, fears of an “imperial crisis” faded for colonial officials. The global revolutionary fever of 1919 had started to wane, as official state repression combined with grassroots fragmentation served to dilute the immediate threat of these movements. At the official level, it appeared as if conditions had returned to a state of normalcy. The passionate outbursts of colonial officials as they discussed the threat of labor unrest and pan-African movements gave way to humdrum, reserved exchanges about matters of administrative policy. The great British Empire appeared stronger than ever before, at the apex of its global power; one-quarter of the world now lived under some form of British rule, making the empire the largest in world history.

As the case of Barbados demonstrates, however, British power on the ground was tenuous and uneven. White Barbadian elites retained an enormous amount of control over local affairs, and had great leeway when it came to accepting imperial directives. British governors had but advisory roles over the independent legislature, and Barbadian planters and merchants preferred to administer the island in their own way, without outside interference. This might suit the British government during times of peace, but as black Barbadians began to embrace pan-African ideologies and question understandings of imperial loyalty, Britain’s inability to intervene became increasingly frustrating.

The tensions of colonial administration, combined with the great chaos of the war and its aftermath, had shaken the way that British officials could rule the empire. In particular, the Colonial Office feared that rising U.S. influence spelled the end for British possessions in the

Western Hemisphere. Demobilization and spreading discontent amongst West Indian troops brought out the implications of losing Caribbean allegiance for the Colonial Office. Part of British imperial power in the Caribbean rested on the myth that Great Britain was “better” at caring for black subjects than the United States. Indeed, the Colonial Office often circulated press reports of segregation, Jim Crow laws, and lynchings in the United States to further impress upon Caribbean subjects the relative benevolence of British rule. Yet, the experience of so many West Indians in the war had undermined British claims to racial tolerance and acceptance. Soon after the war, Gilbert Grindle warned that if West Indians were discharged “with a rankling sense of injustice due to their colour I fear the British connection will be weakened just when we want the loyalty of the black man to hold out against American aggressiveness.”<sup>148</sup> The Caribbean, then, became a theater in which Great Britain would prove to both the United States and the world that it was the “best” trustee of black populations. This was important not just to secure the empire in the Western Hemisphere, but also to show colonial subjects in Africa that the British government cared about black welfare.

Officials in the Colonial Office came to understand the tenuousness of their hold on these far-flung possessions. Colonial subjects from Trinidad to Kenya and on to India searched for alternatives to British rule as they re-imagined their connections to others under colonial rule and questioned the legitimacy of European control like never before. The United States emerged from the war as a global power, holding vast war debts for a struggling Britain. As the United States increased its presence in the Caribbean, British holdings in this neglected and depressed region of its empire reached new significance. It suddenly became important to secure again the loyalty of British West Indian subjects, both to show the United States and the world that Britain was the best caretaker of black populations, and to demonstrate that the war had not weakened

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<sup>148</sup> TNA, CO 318/351/25 Note from Gilbert Grindle, February 3, 1919.

the position of Britain and its empire. The struggle to regain the hearts and minds of West Indian populations would begin with an effort to fortify and restore their bodies.

## Chapter Three

### The Development Cure: New Directions in Trusteeship

#### Introduction

By 1921, while the threat of anti-colonial radicalism in the Caribbean seemed to have ebbed, the nature of British colonial rule was beginning to change. The specter of revolution and pressure from international bodies like the League of Nations signaled that European powers had to make some effort to pacify and care for subject populations. Article 22 in the Covenant of the League of Nations shifted the understanding of European responsibilities toward subject peoples. According to the League, Britain and France could not simply exploit the material resources of subject peoples, as “the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilization.”<sup>1</sup> While the concept of a “civilizing mission” had long been used to justify European imperialism, the League made the stewardship and protection of subject populations an international priority. The Covenant was explicitly concerned with France and Britain’s new mandates carved out of the Ottoman Empire, but the emphasis on trusteeship would come to influence colonial policy in other parts of the world as well.

In France, interwar colonial doctrine came to emphasize the *mise en valeur*, which stressed the “improvement” of subject populations as an integral aspect of French imperialism.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, for Great Britain, members of the League, British reformers, and colonial subjects

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<sup>1</sup> Article 22, The Covenant of the League of Nations, 1920.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 142-173.

alike increasingly pressured the British government to extend the principles of trusteeship to the entire British Empire.<sup>3</sup> The new emphasis on protecting native welfare became codified in Sir Frederick Lugard's 1922 *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*. Lugard, who sat on the League's Permanent Mandate Commission, emphasized that it was Britain's responsibility to safeguard and protect indigenous populations, even as it exploited African resources.<sup>4</sup> The League of Nations covenant, along with metropolitan and colonial pressures, had caused British administrators to engage in new debates over how to justify colonial rule, and it became clear that the British government had to take a more active role in the economic and social development of its colonial possessions.<sup>5</sup> The characterization of what this imperative looked like would be in a state of flux as conflicting priorities and competing ideas on the importance of the empire influenced shifting attitudes among colonial officials in London.

British officials had long understood the idea of "development" in terms of making colonies economically profitable for the metropole, while "trusteeship" typically referred to vague commitments to fostering colonial welfare as a justification for imperial rule.<sup>6</sup> When discussing the West Indies, for example, British officials spoke about the importance of ensuring political stability, economic peace, and investments in infrastructure all in order to allow a more thriving economic relationship between the region and the mother county. Yet, these priorities existed in tension with the need to pacify subject populations to prevent disorder and answer calls for an international vision of trusteeship. The blurred, overlapping, and contradictory meanings of development and trusteeship would change over the course of the decade, as British

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Gorman, *The Emergence of International Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 109.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1922).

<sup>5</sup> Susan Pederson, "Settler Colonialism at the Bar of the League of Nations," in *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Caroline Elkins and Susan Pederson (London: Routledge, 2005), 114.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Havinden and David Meredith, *Colonialism and Development: Britain and its tropical colonies, 1850-1960* (London: Routledge, 1993), 138.



officials struggled amongst themselves as well as with colonial subjects about how to implement new definitions of imperial power. In their efforts to navigate the tensions between pursuing policies that would benefit Britain yet also maintaining hegemony overseas, colonial officials turned increasingly to expert advice and knowledge to find solutions.

Imperial power has long been both exercised and contested through processes of knowledge gathering.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have produced a wealth of studies about how British colonizers used professionals like linguists and archaeologists, and methods like the census, in an attempt to order, classify, control, and discipline native populations.<sup>8</sup> In particular, scientific and technological knowledge, and the idea of “improving” colonial populations, has always been integral to the process of colonial rule.<sup>9</sup> The destruction of the First World War, and the anti-colonial unrest that followed, lead to a renewed focus on the ability of scientific knowledge both to regenerate Europe as well as to restore imperial power in the colonies. The expansion of state power during the war meant that, both at home and in the colonies, the government increasingly

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978); Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel, and Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991); Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Matthew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Roy MacLeod, “On Visiting the 'Moving Metropolis': Reflections on the architecture of imperial science,” *Historical Records of Australian Science* 5:3 (1982): 1-16; Daniel Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Sheldon Watts, *Epidemics and History: Disease, Power and Imperialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); John Gascoigne, *Science in the Service of Empire: Joseph Banks, the British State and the Uses of Science in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

came to direct the course of modernization and improvement.<sup>10</sup> Faith in the capacity of the state to manage populations through bureaucratic control corresponded with the ethos of trusteeship articulated by the League of Nations. According to Joseph Hodge, “With the new emphasis on colonial trusteeship came new demands for state direction and control in such areas as health, sanitary administration, education reform, and rural welfare.”<sup>11</sup> During the interwar years, as Helen Tilley has argued, surveys, reports, and the production of expert knowledge “became prime vehicles through which colonial power was exercised.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the focus with science and health corresponded with metropolitan concerns about how to pay for the vast empire. Britain had emerged from World War I in enormous debt to the United States, forcing a reappraisal of financial commitments to the empire.<sup>13</sup> Knowledge-gathering promised to shed light on new and inexpensive strategies of rule, and the Colonial Office increasingly worked to amass data about living and working conditions in the overseas empire.

The focus on scientific knowledge and health also correlated with broader European anxieties over the “fitness” of populations.<sup>14</sup> In the early twentieth century, in particular after a poor performance in the Boer War, British physicians and government officials concerned with the vitality of the nation became preoccupied with dwindling birth rates, poor infant health, and ideas of “good” motherhood.<sup>15</sup> The demographic consequences of the First World War only heightened fears about national deterioration, and corresponded with renewed campaigns against

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<sup>10</sup> Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men*, 380-381; Joanna Lewis, “‘Tropical East Ends’ and the Second World War: Some Contradictions in Colonial Office Welfare Initiatives,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 28:2 (2000): 43.

<sup>11</sup> Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert*, 118.

<sup>12</sup> Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory*, 71.

<sup>13</sup> Owen, “Critics of Empire,” 192-193.

<sup>14</sup> Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds., *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Anna Davin, “Imperialism and Motherhood,” *History Workshop Journal* 5 (Spring 1978), 12-13.

family planning during the interwar period.<sup>16</sup> British anxieties over the perceived health or degeneration of populations also extended to the colonies, where British officials became concerned with the quality of colonial labor and the need for new strategies of imperial rule following the First World War.<sup>17</sup> Worries over controlling colonial populations increasingly became intertwined with broader eugenic alarm over health, hygiene, and nutrition.

The 1920s thus saw increasing British efforts to coordinate scientific research that paid attention to local circumstances in order to create new colonial knowledge and extend imperial power. As part of these efforts, two British commissions traveled to the Caribbean to collect data on prevailing political and social conditions as they had developed following the war. The commissions found the political and social conditions of the West Indies to be troubling. In particular, the poor sanitation, high incidence of epidemic disease, overcrowded housing, and dismal infant mortality rates that plagued most Caribbean colonies exposed the very human consequences of British neglect in the region. During the 1920s, health became one of the major avenues through which the British government attempted to merge its twin concerns with economic expansion and colonial stewardship.

Modernizing health conditions in overseas territories promised both to fortify the bodies and productivity of laboring populations while also tempering the misery of desperate colonial subjects prone to a new era of anticolonial unrest. In Barbados, improving social conditions became urgent in the midst of unprecedented political activity amongst the island's black working classes. As during the immediate postwar period, UNIA chapters continued to attract large followings and spread the message of pan-African liberation. At the same time, working-

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Manderson, *Sickness and the State*; Karl Ittmann, *A Problem of Great Importance: Population, Race, and Power in the British Empire, 1918-1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); de Barros, *Reproducing the British Caribbean*.

class black Barbadians were also flocking to a new pro-labor movement. The socialist physician, Charles Duncan O’Neal, instituted a political party in the island and a worker’s organization, both aimed at securing higher wages, education, and social welfare benefits for the island’s poor residents. With the continued possibility of unrest in Barbados, British officials worked to find a way to undercut the appeal of radical political movements and re-establish stability in the island.

Despite the promise of new strategies of rule uncovered by colonial knowledge, information about conditions in the West Indies also posed a problem for imperial officials. As Lenore Manderson has established, official inquiries and reports about health and nutrition also had the effect of illustrating “the scope of suffering under colonialism.”<sup>18</sup> When the reports of the commissions detailed the devastating health and living conditions of West Indians under British rule during the early 1920s, it exposed the consequences of imperial neglect and economic decline in the region and only added to the list of grievances that West Indians were articulating against both local and imperial rule during the postwar years. In Barbados, the appalling conditions were not new, but it was the first time that such public attention had been brought to the severe problems with Barbadian health. As the Colonial Office acquired increasing knowledge about the miserable state of Caribbean health, and this knowledge subsequently became available to colonial subjects, officials in London would come to understand the importance of relieving these conditions in order to defer attention from the problems of empire. However, debates over how to proceed would reveal fractures within the Colonial Office and the imperial government itself, as experts and Members of Parliament battled with permanent CO staff over the best way to manage the health and bodies of its West Indian colonial subjects following the war.

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<sup>18</sup> Manderson, *Sickness and the State*, 239.

The problems with Barbadian health had attracted growing local and imperial concern since the beginning of the century, from both local physicians and metropolitan reformers. When it came to health and welfare, it was the working classes of Barbados that suffered the most deeply. The perspective and experiences of West Indian laborers are notoriously difficult to recover, as both British and Caribbean archives privilege the voices of British administrators and Barbadian elites, experts, and journalists. Yet, important details about the experiences of working-class Barbadians can be gleaned from health reports and testimonials. Antoinette Burton and Tony Ballantyne have argued that even though women and other “silenced” groups of people are often absent from imperial archives, discussions of their bodies is not. Thus, they argue, the body is a “contact zone” in imperial history, allowing a lens into “the material effects of geopolitical systems in everyday spaces...the plantation, the theater, the home, the street, the school, the club, and the marketplace are now visible as spaces where people can be seen to have experienced modes of imperial and colonial power.”<sup>19</sup> In Barbados, the experiences of poor Barbadians have largely been lost, but discussions of their bodies have not. The life of a Barbadian worker, as revealed in discussions of their bodies in colonial archives, was one of rampant malnutrition, poverty, desperation, chronic disease, and hard labor. With the highest infant mortality rate in the Caribbean, “Little England” was hardly a satisfactory model for British trusteeship. The history of these efforts illuminates not only the dismal health conditions of the island colony, but also the problems that the imperial government would face as it grappled with developing the Barbadian public health administration in the 1920s.

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<sup>19</sup> Antoinette Burton and Tony Ballantyne, “Introduction,” in *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History*, ed. Burton and Ballantyne (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 6.

## History of Barbadian health

Health, like most issues in Barbados, was deeply intertwined with the peculiarities of local rule. As discussed in the previous chapter, Barbadian planters had enormous—if not complete—control over the legislature in the island. In addition to the central government, the island’s administration was controlled at the parochial level through the vestry system. Based on an old English form of local administration, the island was divided into eleven parishes run by twelve vestries. The vestries were a decentralized system of government based on the Anglican church that collected taxes on land, buildings, livestock, and other property. The church then used these funds to pay church officials and provide for sanitation, road maintenance, and almshouses that catered to the poorest Barbadians. According to Bonham Richardson, the vestry system “was a formidable weapon in the planters’ arsenal directed toward the domination of a large and dependent black labor force.”<sup>20</sup> Vestry members were elected with the same voting restrictions as the House of Assembly, which meant that most vestry officials were members of the local elite. Because vestry funds came primarily from taxes on land, planters and merchants remained invested in keeping expenditure as low as possible. Even though vestry members were supposed to provide sanitation and care for the poor, their goal was really to reign in and reduce expenditure. This meant that spending on public health and welfare was always miserly.

A number of epidemics during the first decade of the twentieth century demonstrated the need for reform of the public health and sanitary structure of the island. In 1902, a smallpox epidemic broke out in St. James parish. When physicians notified the first cases to the vestry, the vestry’s health organization, the St. James Board of Health, met with the Colonial Secretary to discuss how to proceed. The parish desperately needed hospitals to quarantine and treat the ill, but the central government and the vestry quarreled over who had to pay for them. These delays

<sup>20</sup> Richardson, *Panama Money in Barbados*, 19.

meant that the epidemic continued unabated for nearly a month, until several schools were finally transformed into hospitals. However, the hospitals could hold less than half of the infected residents of the parish, and it took nearly two months to acquire vaccines for the disease.<sup>21</sup> The epidemic eventually spread to all parishes of the island, infecting 1,466 people until it abated in April 1903. In his report about the epidemic, John Hutson, a white Barbadian doctor and the Poor Law Inspector, concluded that at the beginning of the outbreak, there existed “no organisation sufficiently complete to deal with the epidemic, and a working system had to be gradually organized as the epidemic went on.” He continued, “The experience gained has been valuable for future epidemics of smallpox or other infectious diseases, but in the next generation this experience will be forgotten, if it is not put into concrete form in the shape of an improved sanitary organisation.”<sup>22</sup>

In 1907, a severe yellow fever epidemic struck much of the British West Indies. As a result, two years later, the Colonial Office sent Rupert Boyce, a pathologist from Liverpool, to investigate medical and sanitary conditions in the area. Boyce visited several British Caribbean colonies and compared how they weathered the epidemic, recommending measures that the local governments could undertake to improve conditions. Barbados fared badly in his estimation compared to the other colonies, and Boyce wrote a scathing condemnation of the island’s indifference to effective health and sanitary administration. The yellow fever epidemic had tested the medical organization of the entire Caribbean, and Boyce concluded that colonies with an “official medical head” fared much better than those without. Barbados, he wrote, “would never have had such a protracted epidemic, nor would it have reached its present proportions, if it had

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<sup>21</sup> BDA, Pam C 312, John Hutson, “Special Report of the Small-Pox Epidemic in the Parish of St. James by the Poor Law Inspector, October, 1902,” in *The Official Gazette*, November 7, 1902, 2-5

<sup>22</sup> BDA, Pam C 299, John Hutson, “Report on the Small-Pox Epidemic in Barbados, 1902-03, August 11, 1903,” in *The Official Gazette*, September 28, 1903, 1493-1503.

possessed a medical head.” More biting, he went on to claim that yellow fever would not have reached the island in the first place if the colony had an experienced, full-time officer to oversee health administration. “In my opinion, it seems incredible that a colony which prides itself in having numerous law officers of experience, yet blinds its eyes to the necessity of a medical head, seeing what is being accomplished to-day in Trinidad, Demerara and the Windward Islands, and seeing the loss of trade which the island has suffered during the past two years.”<sup>23</sup>

In addition, Boyce expressed disbelief to the lack of any sort of report on the nature or number of diseases in the colony as well as causes of mortality. “This condition of lack of medical organisation is, in my experience, unparalleled in any other British Colony, and is all the more remarkable considering the energy of the Barbadians and the fact that the health conditions of Barbados are naturally so favourable that one of the obvious lines of development for the colony is to attract the visitors who are now seeking the West Indies in increasing numbers every year.” He also added that the development of the trade and tourism of the colony were contingent upon having a medical head that published reports to reassure Britain but also the United States along with any other country that sent visitors to the island.<sup>24</sup> Boyce’s visit was part of imperial efforts more broadly to improve colonial health in order to promote stability, economic activity, and profitability in the empire, such as the establishment of institutes of tropical medicine and agriculture in the late-nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Both the Colonial Office and British merchants worked to improve health conditions in the colonies because, as Boyce himself wrote in the report, the study of tropical medicine brought “immense gain to humanity and commerce”.

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<sup>23</sup> BDA, PAM C 285, Reports by Rupert Boyce on Medical and Sanitary Matters in Barbados, the Windward Islands, British Guiana and Trinidad, June 7, 1909, in *The Official Gazette*, January 24, 1910, 178.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert*, chapter two.



Advances in curbing mosquito-borne illnesses in particular lead not only to declining death rates but also “health security, economy, and the progress of commerce.”<sup>26</sup>

The yellow fever epidemic and Boyce’s report finally pushed the Barbadian government to do something to address public health administration. In 1913, the new position of Public Health Inspector was created. The job of the Inspector was to gather information about health and sanitary conditions throughout the island and prepare an annual report that would be submitted to both the Barbadian government and the Colonial Office. However, as a 1921 report would later reflect, the legislature was “terrified” by the possibilities of this initiative. Planter power over taxation depended on control over the decentralized vestry system, and allowing a central officer to direct policy could supersede elite hegemony over local affairs. The House of Assembly enacted new legislation to restrict the power of the office. The Public Health Inspector only had the power to write reports, which were rarely read by either the central government officials or the vestries.<sup>27</sup>

Dr. John Hutson held this position from its inception until 1925. Hutson, a white Barbadian doctor, worked tirelessly to draw attention to the many deficiencies of Barbadian health and sanitation. Hutson often pointed out that it took a major epidemic before local authorities would agree to reform the sanitary administration or health policies of the island. The sanitary organization, he wrote during the war, was “crude, not up-to-date, and lacking in thoroughness.” However, only “an epidemic of quarantinable disease has been necessary to wake them up to defects of organisation and practice, and according to the usual working of the human mind many lessons learned though toil and suffering are almost, if not wholly forgotten.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Reports by Rupert Boyce, 175.

<sup>27</sup> CO 28/302/29, Dr. A.F. Wright and Dr. L. Fairfield, Commissioners, Confidential extract from report of West Indies Commission to National Council for Combating Venereal Disease, 1921.

<sup>28</sup> BDA, “Report of Public Health Inspector, 1915,” in *The Official Gazette*, July 3, 1916, 1281.

Hutson's reports from 1913-1925 painted a portrait of incredible administrative dysfunction and widespread disease throughout the island. The first problem that he targeted was the issue of sanitation and disposal of waste. In the country districts, the most common manner of disposing of excreta was by "going out," which meant dumping them in the nearest cane field or gully. More than half of the homes of the laboring classes lacked any sort of sanitary facilities, and the process of "going out" was "almost universal" in rural villages and plantation tenancies. This made controlling the spread of typhoid, dysentery, and hookworm incredibly difficult.<sup>29</sup> Urban districts fared no better. In Bridgetown, no water carriage system existed for sewage disposal and sanitary authorities made no effort to remove excrement. The usual method of sewage disposal in the city was that families had a privy of some sort with a cesspool dug into the earth. According to Hutson's 1923 report, the sides of these pits were "saturated with the sewage of generations, and often offensive." Every resident had to dispose of the family sewage at their own expense, and the waste was removed from the cesspits in open buckets and carried to the sea. Alternately, urban residents might use a "pail closet" in which a pail of some sort would be used by the family and then dumped into the sea or nearest ditch. Hutson claimed that the poorest residents lacked any privy or closet at all, using instead some sort of tin in the yard.<sup>30</sup> With these conditions, it was no wonder that preventable disease became endemic.

Beginning in 1913, Hutson started urging the island's authorities to act when it came to disposing of sewage. In his first report as Public Health Inspector, he wrote that the city desperately needed an organized system as the "present haphazard system is dangerous, unscientific, and not in accordance with modern standards." In addition, he noted, the government needed to act if they wanted to call the island "a health resort and a centre for

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<sup>29</sup> Annual Report of the Public Health Inspector, 1913, in *The Official Gazette*, June 18, 1914, 9.

<sup>30</sup> The Eleventh Annual Report of the Public Health Inspector, 1923, in *The Official Gazette*, May 4, 1925, 587.

tourists.”<sup>31</sup> In June 1914, the General Board of Health recommended that all homes should have some sort of water closet, privy, or pit for the disposal of excrement. Yet, the parishes did little to enforce such a measure. In St. Michael, the most populous parish on the island, 51.3 percent of homes “were without sanitary conveniences,” but the vestry’s Commissioners of Health did not think it was necessary to adopt the bye-laws.<sup>32</sup> The refusal of St. Michael health commissioners to adopt Board of Health initiatives points to one of the major frustrations of John Hutson and other medical experts had with health administration in the island—it was completely up to individual vestries whether sanitary reforms would be adopted.

In addition to the ineffective disposal of waste, overcrowded housing made it impossible to prevent the spread of infectious disease. The spread of typhoid through human contact was a particular problem in the colony, and struck the poor much more than it affected the rich or middle classes. Since it was spread by insanitary conditions in Barbados and not by water, the poorest Barbadians were most susceptible to the disease. As John Hutson noted in 1916, “The cases chiefly occur amongst the lowest class of the population, living in small crowded houses, without any proper provision for the disposal of excreta, while their habits and mode of life readily favour the spread of any infectious disease.”<sup>33</sup> One parochial officer, for instance, reported “that he found three children sleeping under a bed used by a typhoid patient and that the excrement from the patient dripped through the bed clothing upon the bodies of those lying below.”<sup>34</sup> Not only did children often sleep under the bedsteads of ill family members in these

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<sup>31</sup> Annual Report of the Public Health Inspector, 1913, quoted in the Eleventh Annual Report of the Public Health Inspector, 1923, in *The Official Gazette*, May 4, 1925, 587

<sup>32</sup> BDA, “Report of the Public Health Inspector, 1914,” in *The Official Gazette*, September 30, 1915, 1691.

<sup>33</sup> BDA, “Report of Public Health Inspector, 1915,” in *The Official Gazette*, July 3, 1916, 1269.

<sup>34</sup> BDA, Pam C 277, George C Paul, *Report on the Ankylostomiasis Infection Survey of Barbados* (New York: The Rockefeller Foundation International Health Board, 1917), 12-13.

homes, but the mother of the family would care for a sick child or husband while also preparing food for the family with infected hands.<sup>35</sup>

Typhoid was a preventable illness, and Hutson worked to bring regulations to control the disease before the legislature. Yet, the proposals would sit before the legislature for years without recognition.<sup>36</sup> In the parish of St. Michael, where overcrowding was most endemic and typhoid spread rapidly, the parish delayed implementing prevention measures. One reason for this indifference was that members of the middle and upper classes who decided policy were unaffected by typhoid. Hutson noted that the disease was “relatively infrequent in the case of persons in comfortable circumstances,” as individuals with access to medical care and advice on sanitation were better able to prevent the spread of the illness.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, as with most efforts to improve sanitation and prevent illness, elites who controlled the vestry did not want to spend money on disease control, which would raise their property taxes.<sup>38</sup> Health was just one of the many forms that inequality took in Barbados, and one that revealed itself visibly on poor Barbadian bodies.

Poor conditions in Barbados coincided with new attention to international cooperation in managing health amongst poor populations. As part of increasing U.S. involvement in humanitarian and public health efforts overseas, the Rockefeller Foundation’s International Health Commission began working to treat hookworm in Central America and the Caribbean since 1914. The Commission began in places like British Guiana, Trinidad, Nicaragua, and Panama, each “a laboratory for discovering and testing the elements of a global health system for

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<sup>35</sup> Annual Report of the Public Health Inspector, 1913, in *The Official Gazette*, June 18, 1914, 24.

<sup>36</sup> TNA, CO 28/302/29, Confidential extract from report of West Indies Commission to National Council for Combating Venereal Disease.

<sup>37</sup> Second Annual Report of the Public Health Inspector, 1914, in *The Official Gazette*, September 30, 1915, 1696.

<sup>38</sup> TNA, CO 28/302/29, Confidential extract from report of West Indies Commission to National Council for Combating Venereal Disease.

the twentieth century.”<sup>39</sup> When working in the British Caribbean, physicians within the Rockefeller Foundation had to secure the permission of the Colonial Office. While British officials were happy to accept free assistance for the hookworm problem that ravaged its colonial laborers, U.S. doctors had to work in a subordinate capacity to the British medical administration in each colony.<sup>40</sup>

From September to November 1916, the Barbados public health system came under outside scrutiny when George Paul of the Rockefeller Foundation International Health Board visited the island to survey hookworm incidence. Paul was scornful of both the Barbadian health system, as well as Barbadian themselves. In a private letter, he criticized white Barbadians for their conservatism and opposition to change. While he recognized the problems with sanitation in the colony, he also blamed black Barbadians for their own poor health. According to Paul, “Blacks as a rule have no sense of responsibility, dignity, or honor.”<sup>41</sup> Paul found significant rates of infection throughout the island, but the highest rates were in the eastern parts of the colony. St. Andrew, St. Joseph, and St. John had infection rates as high as 65 percent due to unsanitary disposal of excrement.<sup>42</sup> Two years later, Dr. Howard, the head of the Rockefeller Anti-Hookworm Campaign, visited Barbados in an attempt to address the hookworm problems in the island. The Rockefeller Foundation offered to help free of charge if the government made moderate sanitary improvements to help prevent recurrence. Like with other reform attempts, though, none of the parishes agreed to cooperate because they did not want to pay for the improvements.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Palmer, *Launching Global Health*, 1.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 68-70.

<sup>41</sup> Rockefeller Archive Center, International Health Board, RG 5 (FA115), Series 2: Special Reports; Subseries 2.435: Special Reports- Barbados, Letter from George Paul to W. Jacobs, October 1, 1916.

<sup>42</sup> Paul, *Report on the Ankylostomiasis Infection Survey of Barbados*, 53.

<sup>43</sup> TNA, CO 28/302/29, Confidential extract from report of West Indies Commission to National Council for Combating Venereal Disease.

One of the worst, and most tragic, problems that plagued Barbados was the staggering rate of infant mortality, which, according to the new acting Public Health Inspector, L. C. Hutson, was “probably the highest in the British Empire.”<sup>44</sup> The number of children who perished under the age of two was shocking. From 1916-1925, Barbados averaged 292 infant deaths per thousand. In contrast, Trinidad averaged 142, and Great Britain 83.<sup>45</sup> The rate during some years was over 400 for every 1,000 births. As with typhoid, the incredible infant mortality rate in the island affected the poorest classes most severely. As Hutson noted, economic conditions forced many mothers to return to their house work “in from three to seven days after confinement” and put their infants on a diet of “bush teas”. If the child survived this diet, they were then left in the “unskilled care of a ‘guardian’ or child of tender years” once the mother went back to work, again decreasing its chances of surviving. Tragically, most infants died from entirely preventable diseases like fatal dysentery and other intestinal disorders. According to Hutson, “the sanitation of the working man’s house is primitive in the extreme,” making the deterrence of such diseases impossible. Furthermore, because treatments were expensive and most workers could not afford to take a day off work to travel to a clinic, children were often born with inherited venereal diseases. In 1925 alone, 406 infants died of congenital syphilis.<sup>46</sup>

Previous governors had made some attempts to address the problem. In 1911, alarmed by medical reports that relayed the bleak statistics, the governor appointed a committee to look at the problem of infant mortality. The committee, finding that the death rates were mostly caused by lack of food, proposed several solutions, such as providing free milk to poor mothers and instituting a system of parish nurses to assist families with infant care. However, as usual when it

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<sup>44</sup> The Thirteenth Annual Report of the Public Health Inspector (Acting), 1925, in *The Official Gazette*, August 18, 1927, 1101.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

came to health reform, local authorities refused to pay for the materials and staff needed to undertake such a scheme, and the governor had to give up his efforts.<sup>47</sup> In addition to malnutrition, the sanitary deficiencies in the colony contributed to the high number of infant deaths. In his capacity as Public Health Inspector, John Hutson noted that infant mortality rates in Barbados were peculiar because they changed quite dramatically from year to year, while in other West Indian colonies the numbers remained steady over time. He “discovered that these sudden rises were due to epidemic disease.”<sup>48</sup> Again, though, the local government in Barbados remained indifferent to the health problems that were plaguing the island and causing such heartbreaking consequences.

Yet, the infant mortality rates in Barbados, in addition to the high rates of epidemic disease, overcrowding, and unsanitary conditions, were beginning to cause alarm among imperial officials. In the eyes of metropolitan policymakers, infant mortality rates were a key measure of a colony’s overall health, and Barbados fared particularly badly. More broadly, anxieties over infant health were linked to concerns over the “fitness” of populations and fears of national and imperial decline.<sup>49</sup> The high infant mortality rate in Barbados, then, triggered official fears not only about the ability of Caribbean laborers to work, but also how much desperate Barbadians would withstand in a new era of anti-colonial nationalism. These miserable conditions attracted increasing imperial attention as social disorder spread throughout the West Indies following the war, and when the unrest subsided, the metropolitan government focused on putting its colonial affairs in order with a new focus on knowledge-gathering and improvement.

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<sup>47</sup> BDA, Pam C 277, Paul, Report on the Ankylostomiasis Infection Survey of Barbados, 26.

<sup>48</sup> BDA, Pam C 231, Report of the Proceedings of the West Indian Medical Conference, 1921, 62-63.

<sup>49</sup> Davin, “Imperial Motherhood.”

## Commissions on West Indian health

As part of these concerns, the Colonial Office sent two commissions to the West Indies in the early 1920s. The Wood Commission, which visited the region for three months beginning in December 1921, looked at the constitutional and political organization of the region. The Wood Commission focused on politics due to growing West Indian demands for representative government, particularly in Trinidad and Guyana.<sup>50</sup> The Crown Colony system had come under increasing scrutiny by pan-Africanists and labor leaders in Trinidad following the war, and the Wood Commission promised to promote broader electoral representation in the region. In Barbados, radical papers praised the announcement of the commission as a signal that the Colonial Office was ready to spearhead meaningful change in the West Indies. One editorial noted that the commission “indicates an increased breadth of vision in Colonial Office outlook, and an awakening, however late, to the claims of the West Indies to some recognition by the British Government.”<sup>51</sup> Another editorial expressed hope that “the long period of parental neglect or perfunctory discharge of responsibilities is drawing to a close”. It was a pity, the author continued, that thousands of West Indian laborers had to “seek livelihoods under a foreign flag when the investment of British Capital could have established in their own lands thriving homes and an ever-present horn-of-plenty.”<sup>52</sup> Barbadians who believed in the promises of trusteeship were urging the British government to take a greater role in developing the region, both politically and economically.

Since Barbados already had a form of representative government, the most active criticisms of the Crown Colony system did not directly apply to it. Yet Barbadians were quick to

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<sup>50</sup> Bolland, *The Politics of Labour*, 134-144.

<sup>51</sup> “The Colonial Office and The West Indies: Parliamentary Under Secretary to Visit These Colonies. An Awakening,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, September 3, 1921, 4.

<sup>52</sup> “The West Indies and the Empire,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, September 17, 1921, 4.



point to the rampant inequalities within the supposedly ‘representative’ Barbadian system. A letter to the editor of the *Barbados Weekly Herald* newspaper warned neighboring Crown Colonies that they should not desire representative government if it resembled the structure in Barbados, where “a selfish and dominant minority succeeds in controlling political transactions in this colony.” In fact, the author argued, laborers in Crown Colony governments were given more protection, since Barbadian elites kept wages low to prevent workers from qualifying for the franchise. If the Wood Commission truly investigated the colony, it would find that “the political system of this colony is a Government by the few for the few, that it is an anachronism and an anomaly under which fair treatment for all classes seems impossible.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the Wood Commission acknowledged the problems with Barbados in its report. Noting the monopoly held by the planter and merchant elites in the island, the Commissioners wrote, “it is in fact in the hands of the House of Assembly that political power lies.”<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, the commission did not recommend changes to the property and income requirements that restricted the system.

When the Wood Commission concluded its investigation, it argued that withdrawing from direct imperial oversight in the region would violate principles of British trusteeship. Yet, unlike the Barbadian perspective that focused on the obligation of Britain to invest in West Indian economic development, the Wood commissioners took a more paternalistic and political view of trusteeship. While they recommended some minor concessions to pacify the black and colored middle classes and allow some additional elected members of the legislature in these colonies, they concluded that self-government was out of the question for the Caribbean. According to the commissioners, West Indian colonies should not be granted representative government because the populations were too racially mixed, poor, and uneducated to govern

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<sup>53</sup> “Mr. Wood’s Visit,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, January 14, 1922, 4.

<sup>54</sup> TNA, CO 318/373, Report by E.F.L. Wood on his visit to the West Indies and British Guiana, June 1, 1922, 31.

themselves. The British government, they argued, had “a responsibility of which it cannot morally divest itself” to care for such subjects.<sup>55</sup> Following the postwar protests, the British Empire had no intention of allowing significant black West Indian participation in the political processes of their home colonies.

The other commission that came to the Caribbean in 1921 was sponsored by the National Council for Combating Venereal Diseases (NCCVD). The NCCVD had heretofore served as a domestic organization for dealing with venereal disease in Great Britain, but the focus on colonial problems after the war prompted the Council to tour parts of the British Empire as well. In particular, the movement of troops and seamen during the war had drawn attention to the vast problem of venereal disease in the empire. When colonial troops were recruited for war service, in the Caribbean and elsewhere, many were found unfit for service due to gonorrhoea or syphilis. The Colonial Office grew increasingly concerned with the “unfitness” of colonial populations, and sent the NCCVD inspectors throughout its colonies.<sup>56</sup>

In January of 1921, the representatives Dr. Wright and Dr. Fairfield traveled to Barbados. The Barbadian government supported the arrival of the commission, setting aside £500 to aid the commissioners in their work on the island. According to John Hutson, during their two weeks on the island, the doctors conducted “an energetic campaign” to raise awareness about venereal diseases and addressed all classes of the community at advertised meetings.<sup>57</sup> During their first meeting, Governor O’Brien welcomed the commissioners with a speech that stressed the importance of addressing venereal diseases in the colony. He expressed his hopes that the visit would awaken the public’s awareness and pressure legislative action and public funds “to make

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>56</sup> “The Venereal Diseases Commission,” *Weekly Illustrated Paper*, January 15, 1921, 4.

<sup>57</sup> BDA, The Ninth Annual Report of the Public Health Inspector, 1921, 7-8.

our people present and future healthier happier and more capable of serving their God, their King and Empire with a sound body and sound mind.”<sup>58</sup>

During their time in Barbados, Wright and Fairfield combined inspections of condition in the parishes with meeting with a range of groups and organizations across the island. They met with teachers, friendly and mutual aid societies, medical personnel, local health inspectors and, more generally, with non-specific groups of men and women. The local press welcomed the arrival of the physicians and followed the commission’s activity eagerly. As with Governor O’Brien, the commission’s publications addressed venereal disease as a threat to “the vitality of the nation.”<sup>59</sup> This attention to the strength of the community was a common thread in reporting about the commission. Publications fretted that “the virility of the manhood of the nation” was being threatened by “loose morals.” Venereal disease, the column maintained, led to “the diminution of the population and the sterility of the race.”<sup>60</sup> According to another column, it was “the value of our man-power that stand to benefit by the work of this Commission.”<sup>61</sup> Barbadian concerns regarding the “fitness” of the population echoed broader British fears about national and imperial decline during the postwar years.

The findings of the NCCVD commission in Barbados were some of the most shocking in the British West Indies. In particular, the commissioners encountered horrific conditions in the parish almshouses, which tended to the poorest sectors of Barbadian society. In St. Peter, the commissioners described a row of “night stools” in the exercise yard. “Tiny children were sitting out on these and it was perfectly patent that they were left there for most of the day to look after themselves. The pans under the stools were not emptied, and the poor mites were covered with

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<sup>58</sup> Speech by Charles O’Brien, quoted in *Barbados Weekly Herald*, January 22, 1921, 2.

<sup>59</sup> “The V.D. Commission,” *Barbados Globe*, January 17, 1921, 3.

<sup>60</sup> “The Venereal Diseases Commission,” *Weekly Illustrated Paper*, January 15, 1921, 4.

<sup>61</sup> “The V.D. Commission,” *Barbados Globe*, January 28, 1921, 3.

septic sores from 'jiggers', in some cases without any dressing on them.” The rooms were also severely overcrowded. One ward, which had only four beds, housed three women and fifteen children, most of whom slept on the floor. To make matters worse, the sick and healthy were lodged together, which did little to prevent the spread of disease.<sup>62</sup> The commissioners were so struck by the wretched conditions in the almshouses that they called special attention in their initial report to the condition of the children. “This is for the most part unsatisfactory even when judged by the normal standard of living and upbringing of the negro child; in the worst cases it is disgraceful. It is no hardship for these little ones to wear scanty garments and to sleep on the floor, but they should not be herded with typhoids, labour cases, foul smelling ulcers, dying pellagrins, etc., nor is it good training for children of any colour to grow up in contact only with the wreckage of life.”<sup>63</sup> The colony desperately needed not only proper orphanages, but also separate wards for the sick and the healthy in parish almshouses.

In addition to exposing the state of poor relief in the colony, like Hutson and the Rockefeller Foundation had done before, the NCCVD drew attention to the problems with hookworm, typhoid, high infant mortality, and other preventable diseases. The commissioners reserved their greatest criticism for the legislature and the vestry councils, which had refused the help of the Rockefeller Foundation in 1918 and neglected to take any action regarding the high infant mortality rate. The legislature’s indifference to typhoid, they wrote, was “scandalous.” As the commission concluded, “No concerted action is being taken by the Island against this disease, which is apparently regarded with perfect equanimity.”<sup>64</sup> The report from Barbados was so damning that the Colonial Office would not allow it to become public. West Indian Department

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<sup>62</sup> TNA, CO 323/880/34, Dr. A.F. Wright and Dr. L. Fairfield, Confidential Report made by the West Indies Commission to the National Council for Combating Venereal Diseases.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> TNA, CO 28/302/29, Confidential extract from report of West Indies Commission to National Council for Combating Venereal Disease.

clerk Edward Darnley called it “an able and scathing document, and even when edited will probably have to go out in a secret desp[atch].”<sup>65</sup> Gilbert Grindle agreed that “The Barbados conf[idential] report reveals a disgraceful state of affairs.”<sup>66</sup> The situation presented a dilemma for the office. As another clerk wrote, the report revealed “the disgusting conditions of the Institutions under the local Vestries in Barbados” which were “too revolting to be allowed to pass without action.” However, the Colonial Office had little leeway in the situation, as it would “have to deal not only with the House of Assembly but also the Local Vestries, over neither of which has the Secretary of State the slightest vestige of control.”<sup>67</sup> The unique constitutional position of Barbados posed a particular problem to officials contemplating reform.

In its official report, the NCCVD shed light upon some of the constitutional and cultural particularities of Barbados that would make change difficult. The House of Assembly, the commissioner wrote, “is probably the most solidly conservative and reactionary body in the world.” More than anything, they noted, the legislature feared imposing an income tax and “all public considerations are subordinated to the need of keeping within such a revenue as can be raised by taxing the necessities of life.”<sup>68</sup> The local press in Barbados, while not privy to the information in the confidential report, recognized similar problems. The *Herald* also drew attention to the Assembly’s heated opposition to the income tax bill, and wrote that the legislature was pursuing a “policy of defeatism, and obstruction” to block any new legislation from passing. The Assembly’s strategy was to show that there was no need for extra funds, and

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<sup>65</sup> TNA, CO 318/369, Minute by Edward Darnley, September 7, 1921.

<sup>66</sup> TNA, CO 318/369, Minute by Gilbert Grindle, September 24, 1921

<sup>67</sup> TNA, CO 318/369, Minute by Alexander Fiddian, n.d.

<sup>68</sup> TNA, CO 28/302/29, Confidential extract from report of West Indies Commission to National Council for Combating Venereal Disease.

thus no need for an income tax. “Meanwhile the public body denied several essentials is starved and wasted.”<sup>69</sup>

The work of the NCCVD had attracted widespread Barbadian attention not only to the problems with public health in the colony, but also to the unwillingness of local elites to make meaningful reforms that might utilize public funds. Political cartoons depicted Drs. Wright and Fairfield consulting with O’Brien and warning that “our labours will be in vain unless you spend freely from your purse”, to which O’Brien replied “I must wait on the generosity of the House of Assembly.”<sup>70</sup> The *Herald* worried that the work of the VD commission would be unsuccessful because of these government conditions, and pointed out the classed nature of the Assembly’s priorities. “In the first place, the people who stand to benefit most are not thought to be worth the expenditure of public money. Secondly every penny of extra money spent on objects however justifiable, however desirable, will be denied by the opponents of the Income Tax.” When it came time to fund any of the commission’s initiatives, the government would likely maintain that addressing venereal disease was a low priority since Barbados “got along in the past and shall do so for the future.”<sup>71</sup>

The *Herald*’s words were prophetic. By the end of 1921, Barbadian finances were in dire straits and the government no longer had funds to ensure even basic public services, including the salaries of civil servants. Yet, the House of Assembly continued to refuse to institute an income tax to support essential government services. Instead, the legislature continued to drastically cut all public spending and instituted a severe austerity regime. According to an exasperated Governor O’Brien, white elites would “escape taxation as far as possible by reducing expenditure almost without regard to consequences.” Their drastic cuts to the police

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<sup>69</sup> “The Outlook,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, January 22, 1921, 4.

<sup>70</sup> *Weekly Illustrated Paper*, January 22, 1921, 1.

<sup>71</sup> “The Outlook,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, January 22, 1921, 4.

force and fire brigade, in particular, demonstrated “what lengths certain sections are prepared to go to escape the unpleasant necessity of taxing themselves to maintain the Administration.”<sup>72</sup>

The extent to which Assembly members would go in order to prevent the creation of an income tax and protect their own personal wealth suggests how strongly they opposed spending public money on health services.

This willingness to forego public welfare for the sake of preventing an income tax made the situation difficult for reformers, both in Barbados as well as from the British government. As Hutson had observed over his tenure as Poor Law Inspector and Public Health Inspector, the decentralized nature of the public health administration made affecting meaningful change impossible. Following the NCCVD’s damning report about the colony, the Colonial Office consulted W.E.F. Jackson, the new Colonial Secretary of Barbados, about how to proceed. Jackson suggested that the CO “send as stiff a despatch as possible with the idea that the Gov might communicate it to the Legislature—and that their consciences might be roused.”<sup>73</sup> Jackson’s suggestion, along with the testimony of John Hutson, would eventually result in a notorious 1923 dispatch to the Barbadian legislature that reflected the Colonial Office’s particular vision of trusteeship during the early 1920s. It would take the efforts of a Barbadian doctor to pressure the imperial government to make such a forceful move.

### **John Hutson and parliamentary pressure**

The new awareness of the problems with Barbadian public health posed difficulties for the official mind and complex culture of the Colonial Office. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Colonial Office expected the colonies to support and take care of

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<sup>72</sup> TNA, CO 28/301/22, Charles O’Brien to Winston Churchill, March 23, 1922.

<sup>73</sup> TNA, CO 28/302/29, Minute by Wiseman, August 24, 1923.

themselves, largely without the financial help of the metropole.<sup>74</sup> As the CO official Kenneth Blackburne later remembered, “power in many matters rested with Colonial Governors and legislatures and not in London.”<sup>75</sup> Yet, this historic structure clashed with new appeals to take direct involvement with colonial development in the early 1920s. It would take pressure from several sources to force the Colonial Office to take a more direct role in the internal affairs of Barbados.

One source of pressure to improve the health of colonial populations more broadly came from the Rockefeller Foundation’s International Health Board (IHB). During a meeting with Colonial Office officials at the House of Commons in 1921, the director of the IHB, Dr. Wickliffe Rose, urged the British government to found a Central Institute of Hygiene and Public Health to manage health and hygiene for the entire empire. Controlling disease, he argued, required centralized administration and permanent agencies to collaborate and manage epidemics across national boundaries. Centralized control of public health had wider implications in the minds of the IHB. As Dr. Rose stated, it was “not only for the sake of the British Colonies in the British Empire, but for the sake of public health the world over that the Board was particularly interested in what may be done in London.”<sup>76</sup> The IHB emphasized to the British government that public health problems in the colonies did not occur in isolation, but affected the entire world. The post-World War I emphasis on internationalism and cooperation placed British colonial policy under scrutiny, as international bodies urged the Colonial Office to take action in the empire.

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<sup>74</sup> Heuring, “Health and the Politics of ‘Improvement’ in Jamaica,” 27.

<sup>75</sup> Kenneth Blackburne, *Lasting Legacy: A Story of British Colonialism* (London: Johnson Publications, 1976), 42.

<sup>76</sup> TNA, CO 885/27/1, Summary of Proceedings of a Conference between the Colonial Office and Representatives of the Rockefeller Foundation, July 1921, 4.



Another major source of pressure for reform and centralization came from the local level in Barbados. John Hutson, the long-serving Public Health Inspector of Barbados, was growing exasperated with local reticence to change. 1921 was an especially miserable period for Barbadian health, with the death rate rising thirty percent over the previous year. The increased mortality was due to a typhoid epidemic, with over 3,000 reported cases.<sup>77</sup> In May of that year, Hutson sent an urgent memo to the government, the General Board of Health, and parish sanitary authorities urging a number of changes to prevent the further spread of typhoid. This time, due to the severity of the outbreak, the government listened and sanitary inspectors began visiting infected districts twice a week and quarantining serious cases. These measures helped to slow the spread of the epidemic by the end of the year. While Hutson was pleased that the legislature had acted, he lamented that once again “a severe epidemic had been required to secure some advance in sanitary control.”<sup>78</sup> Hutson feared that the health administration of the island would return to its typical state of inertia and dysfunction as soon as the epidemic ceased.

In January 1922, Hutson’s frustration led him to submit a detailed memo to the Colonial Office relating the many problems with public health administration in the island. Believing that the House of Assembly would never adopt meaningful and permanent reform, Hutson begged the British government to step in and help to improve conditions. His main complaints focused on the lack of coordination between the central Board of Health, an advisory body made up of local experts, and parochial medical officers, who had primary responsibility for overseeing public health locally. These medical officers typically refused to heed the advice and warnings of the Board of Health, as they “resent any infringement on their powers.” Hutson gave a list of

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<sup>77</sup> BDA, The Ninth Annual Report of the Public Health Inspector, 1921, 2-4.

<sup>78</sup> BDA, The Ninth Annual Report of the Public Health Inspector, 1921, 5.

recommended reforms such as registering causes of death, regulating the milk supply, and introducing measures to control venereal disease.<sup>79</sup>

The NCCVD report and Hutson's correspondence coincided with greater parliamentary attention to colonial development, which provided a second source of pressure on the Colonial Office to instigate reform. In postwar parliamentary discussions about the West Indies, discussions about development took on a different tenor because of the region's proximity to the United States. The U.S. had taken very aggressive measures to develop both the economy and infrastructure of its Caribbean possessions. Cuba and Puerto Rico served as constant contrasts with the British West Indies as a different and more proactive example of trusteeship, and British officials came to believe that they needed to act along U.S. lines or risk losing the respect and loyalty of West Indians as well as the regard of the rest of the world. During the summer of 1922, pro-empire conservatives within the British government became particularly concerned with the state of neglect of British colonial possessions in the Caribbean.

A parliamentary debate in July drew attention to British official concerns about West Indian conditions and the growing influence of the United States in developing the region. William Ormsby-Gore, the conservative Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, spoke passionately about the need to develop British West Indian territories. Recently returned from accompanying the Wood Commission's tour of the West Indies, Ormsby-Gore stated that "the West Indian people feel that this country has not done all it might do to help the British West Indies economically. They look at what America is doing for Cuba and Porto [*sic*] Rico. They see the energy and interest exercised by America in the development of those Colonies." Great Britain, he argued, must also work to develop the British Caribbean. He warned that the West Indian colonies were increasing their trade with the United States, and warned that the British

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<sup>79</sup> TNA, CO 28/302/29, Memorandum from John Hutson to Colonial Secretary Barbados, January 17, 1922.

Empire was under threat in the region. Americans, he declared, had their eye on the Caribbean and felt that Britain was not utilizing the area properly. To guard against this, it was “the duty of this country and of this Parliament to do everything in its power to stimulate and encourage the development of those vast tracts of the Empire.”<sup>80</sup> Others echoed his sentiment. Percy Hurd, a conservative MP, also pointed to “the advantages that the preferential system of the United States is bringing to the American colonies,” and urged the British Empire to follow this example.<sup>81</sup> Developing the economic and trading capacity of the colonies was still at the forefront of colonial development initiatives in the early 1920s.

However, concerns over health and welfare also became central to increasing British attention to colonial development plans. During the same debate, Ormsby-Gore spoke passionately about conditions in the region, stating that “there is no subject on which the West Indies want more help, more encouragement and more push than on the question of public health.” He recounted the high mortality rates, rampant numbers of tropical diseases, and underpaid medical staff that he encountered during his travels.<sup>82</sup> Here again, comparisons to the United States caused no small amount of anxiety, referring to the Rockefeller Foundation’s campaigns to curb hookworm in several British West Indian colonies. Conservative MP Francis Fremantle fretted during the July debate “that we are not doing nearly as much as America is doing for her Colonies” and that they had to “rely on America for some of the best work that is done in our own Colonies” as the U.S.-based development projects took an increasingly prominent role in the welfare of the region.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *Hansard* House of Commons Debates (hereafter HC Deb), July 4, 1922, vol 156, col. 260-263.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 267.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 260-263.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 286.

## The CAMSC and clashing development models

Parliamentary concerns with developing economies and social services coincided with the information gathered by the Wood Commission and the NCCVD. Yet, British attempts to articulate a colonial development agenda faced a number of problems during this time period. The British Treasury, for its part, typically balked at financing any projects in the colonies that did not directly benefit the British economy. As a result, when it came to improving health in the empire, the British government often resorted to “advisory” development, in which the Colonial Office would pressure colonial states to reform public health and welfare, but not provide the financial resources to back these efforts. By the interwar period, however, the scientific and medical experts that became increasingly important in shaping colonial policy began to grow dissatisfied with this approach. Experts advocated a more “active” form of colonial development, in which the British government would aggressively finance reform schemes in the colonies to achieve concrete change. Clashes over both the political and financial implications of these two approaches to colonial development would create tensions between various members of the British government.

As part of British efforts to organize colonial health services in the 1920s, an advisory committee for colonies in Africa was extended to oversee the medical and sanitary services of all British colonies. The resulting Colonial Advisory Medical and Sanitary Committee (CAMSC) worked to coordinate medical services across the empire, believing that a policy of centralization was the best method to reform health and sanitation.<sup>84</sup> Yet the actions of the CAMSC regarding Caribbean health in the mid-1920s would demonstrate how the struggle over implementing development policies occurred not only between colonial elites and imperial officials, but also between the Colonial Office and its hired experts. The professional members of the committee

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<sup>84</sup> Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert*, 119-120.

had long used their official knowledge to recommend reforms in Africa, but after only two years of studying the West Indies, they had come to realize the serious nature of deficiencies with sanitary and medical services in the region.<sup>85</sup> The CAMSC began to press the Colonial Office to take urgent action to ameliorate the poor health conditions suffered by poor West Indians.

When it came time to take official action, the Colonial Office usually sent a cautious memo or secret dispatch to colonial governments outlining its advice. Yet, this strategy caused serious division between CO staff and the medical experts employed by the British government. As the CAMSC learned more and more about the miserable health conditions in the West Indies, committee members grew increasingly frustrated with the health problems of the region and felt that more drastic measures needed to be taken. Calling the conditions there “deplorable and discreditable to the British Empire,” they complained of the resistance of local officials to public health projects. Furthermore, the CAMSC expressed frustration with how West Indian governments blocked reform efforts due to a lack of funds and shortage in medical staff. By early 1925, the doctors and scientists on the committee began to argue that the only way to improve the appalling conditions in the region was by allotting Imperial funds to assist the sanitation needs of the colonies, and threatened Colonial Office staff that they would circumvent their moderate efforts by appealing to the new Secretary of States for the Colonies, Leo Amery, directly.<sup>86</sup>

The experts on the committee, such as the pulmonologist James Kingston Fowler, saw colonial development more broadly as intrinsically linked to health. He considered it “useless to talk of developing the resources of the Empire unless proper measures were taken to safeguard the health of the native populations” and urged using British funds for development. However,

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<sup>85</sup> TNA, CO 318/383, Resolution by the professional members of the CAMS Committee, April 15, 1925.

<sup>86</sup> TNA, CO 318/383, James Kingston Fowler’s Memorandum on Health Conditions in the West Indies, in Extracts from the 208<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the CAMS Committee, February 1925.

permanent Colonial Office staff members were reticent to take such direct action and resisted calls to use British money to fund medical efforts in the colonies. Edward Darnley, the principal clerk of the West Indies Department, resisted any effort that threatened to “sap the independence of Colonial Governments” and argued that the West Indian states would need to find “their own medical and sanitary salvation.” Fowler and Darnley bickered continuously about how to act in the Caribbean, with Fowler advocating for direct imperial assistance while Darnley remained firm that British funds and direct intervention were “far removed from practical politics” as a policy endeavor.<sup>87</sup>

The Colonial Office staff was hamstrung by both Treasury constraints and a culture of stasis within the office itself. Permanent staff members agreed with the CAMSC that “serious evils continue to exist” in the West Indies but felt that British taxpayers could not be expected to pay for sanitary improvements in the area. They tended to believe that the Colonial Office should pursue a strategy of persuasion and education, rather than to impose a top-down policy. As Darnley argued, “We shall not get very far with sanitation in the West Indies as long as it is imposed by regulation from above on an indifferent or hostile community.”<sup>88</sup> Gilbert Grindle summed up the attitudes of the Colonial Office by remarking that the British government should only advise the colonial governments about what kind of reforms they needed. According to Grindle, in the West Indies, good could only be done by “pegging away” in a place that was “roused from time to time by special missions” only to “plunge in sleep again.” Thus he thought that the committee should specify the problems and propose remedies.<sup>89</sup> The Colonial Office usually pursued this strategy of advisory development throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

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<sup>87</sup> TNA, CO 318/383, Extracts from the 208<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the CAMS Committee, February 1925.

<sup>88</sup> TNA, CO 318/383, Minute by Edward Darnley, March 18, 1925.

<sup>89</sup> TNA, CO 318/383, Minute by Gilbert Grindle, March 21, 1925

However, the warnings of the CAMSC found a sympathetic ear with Leo Amery and William Ormsby-Gore, conservative imperialists who were resolutely in favor of financing colonial development projects in order to broaden the economic value of the empire. Ormsby-Gore, who met with the professional members of the CAMSC in response to their pleas, agreed that the British government should persuade the Treasury to give the region an imperial grant.<sup>90</sup> Yet, Amery was only able to finagle imperial funds for the Windward and Leeward Islands. While Amery and Ormsby-Gore wished to pursue more aggressive measures in the Caribbean, they faced resistance both from the Colonial Office permanent staff and the British treasury. Colonial Office clerks took a cautious path, reluctant to interfere in the colonies, while the Treasury typically declined to use domestic funds to pay for the problems of the far-flung empire, especially economically stagnant colonies like the West Indies. Nevertheless, the damning reports that continued pouring into Britain from the Caribbean as well as other parts of the empire demonstrated problems of medical and sanitary administration that could not be ignored.

### **Hutson's visit to London**

The tension between CAMSC experts and permanent CO staff remained constant throughout the early 1920s. Yet, the case of Barbados would eventually lead the two departments to join together in pursuit of a more aggressive tactic to encourage health reform. Because of the NCCVD commission and Hutson's urgent memos, in 1923 the CAMSC turned its attention to Barbados, which had done little to address the conditions exposed by the NCCVD report. The committee was shocked by health conditions in the colony.<sup>91</sup> The members invited Dr. Hutson to testify at the August 1923 CAMSC meeting. Officials at the Colonial Office supported the action

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<sup>90</sup> TNA, CO 318/383, Minute by W. Ormsby-Gore, June 17, 1925.

<sup>91</sup> TNA, CO 28/302/29, Devonshire to O'Brien, September 14, 1923.

but privately worried that “the prospect of inducing Barbadians to mend their ways seems remote.”<sup>92</sup>

During Hutson’s subsequent testimony, he reprised his longstanding indictment of the dysfunction and disorganization that marked the public health administration in the island. As he had been arguing for many years, Hutson attested to the ineffectiveness of the fragmented system, and complained that he did not have any control over parochial health or sanitary inspectors. According to Hutson, public health in Barbados intersected with elite concerns over local hegemony.<sup>93</sup> Barbadian elites refused to change the ancient vestry system in place in the colony, which gave planter and merchant elites great leeway in deciding local policy. Indeed, this issue of local control became the most apparent during his visit, and is one that would come to dominate any imperial efforts to develop health and welfare in Barbados.

The CAMSC questioned Hutson about the familiar Barbadian problems of infant mortality, hookworm, and typhoid. As they questioned the doctor, the power dynamics of Barbadian politics became even more apparent. When a committee member noted the increasing rates of typhoid in the island, Hutson conceded that most parishes had refused to carry out improvements and warned that the House of Assembly was likely to reject any attempts at regulation. Similarly, when the committee questioned him about the Rockefeller hookworm campaign, he affirmed that “it was perfectly true that the majority of the parishes had refused to carry out the Commissions [*sic*] recommendations.”<sup>94</sup> The CAMSC were scandalized that there had been no medical or sanitary advances in the colony in the last decade, but learned from Hutson’s interview that the local government would likely refuse regulation.

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<sup>92</sup> TNA, CO 28/302/29, Minute by HJD, June 12, 1923.

<sup>93</sup> TNA, CO 28/302/29, Minutes of the 174th meeting of the Colonial Advisory Medical and Sanitary Committee, August 7, 1923.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*



Hutson reviewed the many recommendations to centralize medical and sanitary administration that he had been urging since 1913. The biggest problem, he relayed, was that the local authorities who controlled the medical staff “could not be persuaded to give up their ancient privileges.”<sup>95</sup> The Colonial Secretary of Barbados, W.E.F. Jackson, attended the meeting as well and added that the root of the problem was the apathy of the local government, “who did not seem to realise that Barbados was the most unhealthy of the West Indian Colonies.”<sup>96</sup> The CAMSC took these warnings into consideration, and debated the best way to proceed in the face of such legislative hurdles. The particularities of the Barbadian constitution, the policy of colonial self-sufficiency, and the Treasury’s aversion to diverting domestic resources to the empire restricted the nature of British intervention in the Caribbean, so the committee concluded that a stiff dispatch from the Colonial Office might persuade the Barbadian legislature to act on their own. They accordingly sent their concerns and recommendations to the West Indies Department.

### **Devonshire’s dispatch 1923**

The combination of two years of pressure from the NCCVD report, Hutson’s activism, Parliamentary concerns, and the attention of the CAMSC finally prompted the Colonial Office to take more direct action in Barbados. The West Indies Department agreed that the best course of action would be to exert great pressure on the governor of the island to persuade the legislature to institute reforms. Colonial Office clerks drafted a memo over the course of several months, and the resulting dispatch, which the Colonial Office sent to Governor O’Brien in September 1923, was deprecating. Signed by the Duke of Devonshire, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the memo related the impressions of both John Hutson and the CAMSC towards the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

Barbadian health system. Referring to Hutson’s detailed testimony before the committee, the memo called Barbados one of the least health colonies in the British Empire. Devonshire admonished the Barbadian government for the island’s “grievous and sad” high infant mortality rate and instances of epidemic diseases that were “the inevitable outcome of inadequate sanitary control.” Indeed, referring to the infant mortality rate, the memo explained that it was “higher than any which they have yet encountered in dealing with the medical reports of the Colonies and Protectorates, and must in their opinion be put down not only to depressed economic conditions but also to defective sanitation and to the absence of a widely-organised system of education for mothers.”<sup>97</sup>

Calling upon the supposed Britishness of the colony, Devonshire revealed that the committee was “surprised to learn that, in a Colony with such an ancient history of British influence and settlement as Barbados, there should be so scanty an appreciation of the vital importance of good sanitation to the health and welfare of the community.” According to these metropolitan experts, it was imperative that the Barbadian government should “place the control of sanitation in the hands of a properly qualified and organised central body with powers and funds adequate to its purpose.” This emphasis on centralization was the crux of the memo. As part of its increasing faith in scientific expertise and modernized medical organization, the Colonial Office urged the Barbadian government to reduce high disease and mortality rates through “preventative sanitary work” and centralized control.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, by aligning medical reform with seemingly “British” values of sanitation and hygiene, Devonshire hoped to appeal to the “Little England” mentality of Barbadian elites.

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<sup>97</sup> TNA, CO 28/302/29, Devonshire to O’Brien, September 14, 1923.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

The memo was uncharacteristically severe for colonial correspondence. Most dispatches to Barbados from the Colonial Office were exceedingly polite and worked very hard not to offend Barbadian elites. In this way, the severity of the Devonshire dispatch revealed the frustration of colonial officials with the horrible conditions in Barbados. At the same time, it exposed the inability of the Colonial Office to take effective action even when conditions were desperate. Devonshire had little power, or desire, to intervene directly in Barbadian affairs. The Colonial Office had to rely on Governor O'Brien to impress the views of the Committee on the legislature and parochial authorities, so that they understood the importance of improving public hygiene to bring it to a comparable level as that of other British Colonies.

Pressure to reform public health administration came from local and metropolitan circles as well as from medical experts and policymakers. John Hutson had long been pressing for reform locally, and appealed for help from the Colonial Office after years of frustration at home. The Rockefeller Foundation had also noted the problems with the Barbadian health administration, as well as Rupert Boyce's yellow fever investigation prior to the war. The NCCVD report and Hutson's visit to the CO coincided with the postwar emphasis on trusteeship, which prompted the Colonial Office to send the memo. Yet, the dispatch, for all of its new severity, still exemplified the traditional Colonial Office tactic of advisory development that privileged colonial self-sufficiency. Despite the emphasis placed upon colonial trusteeship and development in the years following the war, in many ways colonial policy had not changed in practice.

When the dispatch arrived in Barbados, it became public knowledge when O'Brien placed the memo before the legislature. However, as with all legislative activity in Barbados, it took some time to generate any movement. When acting governor W.E.F. Jackson forwarded the

reports of the Public Health inspector in July of the following year, the legislature had not yet dealt with the recommendations of the dispatch.<sup>99</sup> As time passed and the Barbados government continued to take no action about health conditions in the colony, Colonial Office staff continued to read medical reports about the horrible conditions in Barbados. One official noted in late 1924 that health reports were “depressing” and “the fault for the sad conditions revealed does not lie with the local medical service but is a result of the decentralization of medical and sanitary work and its partial control by local lay sanitary boards or councils.” Growing increasingly frustrated with the government’s slow action, the CO once again sent an enquiry to the Barbados government in an attempt to stimulate the legislature, but received nothing back.<sup>100</sup>

### **Electoral shifts and radical organization**

The need for reform became more urgent as working- and middle-class black Barbadians became more involved in grassroots political organizations and radical movements. Nascent political movements received steady backing from the most long-lasting radical paper in Barbados, *The Barbados Weekly Herald*. Established in 1919 by the black liberal journalist Clement Inniss, the *Herald* initially focused on urging democratic changes in Barbados, such as expanding the franchise and other liberal reforms. Soon, though, the paper began advocating more leftist views with the addition of a new journalist. Clennell Wickham, a black Barbadian who had served in the British West Indies Regiment, returned from the war embracing pan-African and socialist ideas. As an editorialist for the *Herald*, Wickham was relentless in his attacks on the local white oligarchy, and worked to expose the economic and political constraints that sustained the entrenched class inequalities in Barbados. By the mid-1920s, the paper had become one of the most influential weeklies amongst non-elite, politically active Barbadians, and

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<sup>99</sup> TNA, CO 28/303/17, Jackson to Thomas, July 9, 1924.

<sup>100</sup> TNA, CO 28/303/17, Minute on file, September 2, 1924.

helped to raise awareness and support for nascent grassroots political movements in the colony.<sup>101</sup>

In 1924, the Barbadian-born physician Charles Duncan O’Neal spearheaded a new populist political organization called the Democratic League. O’Neal, who had been born into a black, middle-class family, went to Edinburgh University to study medicine. While in Scotland, O’Neal became involved in leftist politics and joined the Independent Labour Party. Upon his return to the Caribbean in 1910, O’Neal practiced medicine in Trinidad and worked with the labor organizer A.A. Cipriani. He returned to Barbados permanently in 1924, and began to advocate for the interests of Barbadian laborers. Working with Clennell Wickham to identify other Barbadian reformers, O’Neal’s Democratic League began to register new voters and urge them to participate in elections. The League also identified and supported potential “progressive” candidates to run for the House of Assembly, campaigning for populist reforms like free education and medical care. During a bye-election in 1924, the first Democratic League candidate, Chrissie Brathwaite, won the seat for St. Michael in a sweeping victory that appeared to signal a popular awakening in Barbadian electoral politics.<sup>102</sup>

The League benefited from the influence of “Panama money” in Barbados. Remittances from migrants allowed many Barbadian families to purchase their own land for the first time. Between 1897 and 1929, the number of small proprietors more than doubled as cash-strapped planters sold off pieces of land to aspiring Barbadians eager to invest remittances from the Canal Zone.<sup>103</sup> Slowly, more black Barbadians became eligible for the franchise through property

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<sup>101</sup> John Wickham, “Clennell Wilsden Wickham (1895-1938) Advocate of Socialism,” in Clennell Wickham, *A Man with a Fountain Pen*, ed. John Wickham (Bridgetown: Nation Publishing Co, 1995),vii-xi.

<sup>102</sup> Keith Hunte, “The Struggle for Political Democracy: Charles Duncan O’Neal and the Democratic League,” in *The Empowering Impulse*, 135-139.

<sup>103</sup> Hilary Beckles, *A History of Barbados* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 211.

ownership, and the Democratic League worked vigorously to identify and recruit these new voters for progressive causes.

In 1926, the new governor of Barbados, William Robertson, wrote a dispatch to London expressing his concerns. He warned that O’Neal was “doing much harm, particularly by raising the colour question.” Yet, Robertson sympathized with the overall aims of the Democratic League, which he summarized as “improved wages and conditions of life for the labouring class, proper sanitation, compulsory education and matters of that kind.” Like the Colonial Office, Robertson recognized the danger of radicalism due to the squalid social conditions in the island. Discussing the condition of Barbadian laborers, he observed, “it is hard to understand how existence is maintained with wages at their present level, it is easy to see why overcrowding, squalor and disease are so common.” According to the governor, it was “imperative that something should be done to improve conditions of life among the working classes.” As workers became more educated, there would come the “desire for reasonable comfort, followed by discontent. There will then be ready material for the agitator.” It was no wonder that the Democratic League was gaining membership. Robertson warned that, “Unless employers and Government come to realise that conditions must be improved and reasonable demand satisfied, adherence to this or perhaps other more revolutionary societies, may become more general, and discontent more menacing,” he wrote to Amery.<sup>104</sup>

Robertson recognized the role that poor social conditions had on political organization in the island, as the health problems identified by the NCCVD and CAMSC affected Barbadian workers most prominently. Year after miserable year, poor Barbadian laborers who could not afford health care, expensive sanitary facilities, or child care helplessly watched their children die while wealthy Barbadian families thrived. It is thus no surprise that O’Neal, a socialist

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<sup>104</sup> TNA, CO 28/305/13, Robertson to Amery, June 21, 1926.

physician who expressed great sympathy to the plight of the working poor, would amass such a following.

By 1927, O’Neal expanded his activism by founding a branch of the Workingmen’s Association (WMA) in Barbados. The WMA was a fraternal organization for laborers, first established in the West Indies in Trinidad during the late nineteenth century. Based on English labor organizations like the London Workingmen’s Association, the Trinidad WMA posed challenges to the Crown Colony system of government and advocated for improved working conditions.<sup>105</sup> The Barbadian association received inspiration and financial assistance from the Trinidad WMA, which had a robust following.<sup>106</sup> In Barbados, the WMA aimed to instill a sense of self-help amongst workers and promote social reforms such as ending child labor and clearing slums. During marches in Barbados, members carried signs with wording that revealed the concerns of the working classes, such as “One meal a day for all hungry school children”, “Better hospital treatment for the poor,” and “Take the babies from out of the fields.”<sup>107</sup> By 1928, the organization had 1,800 members from around the colony. The WMA spread its message through open-air meetings, during which the leaders of the movement attacked planter and merchant exploitation of black Barbadians and urged Barbadian workers to unite against elite control over the island.<sup>108</sup> The meetings were inspired by the message of Marcus Garvey, and attracted UNIA members who blended pan-African messages with principles of labor organization.

Speakers at the meetings decried the obvious class and racial disparities that characterized Barbados. Black Barbadians had “no house but the almshouse and Glendairy,”

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<sup>105</sup> Jerome Teelucksingh, *Labour and the Decolonization Struggle in Trinidad and Tobago* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 12-13.

<sup>106</sup> BDA, GH 4/36, Inspector General of Police to Colonial Secretary, January 12, 1927.

<sup>107</sup> BDA, GH 4/37a, Brathwaite to Detective Inspector, August 2, 1927.

<sup>108</sup> Browne, *Race, Class, Politics*, 96-99.

referring to the notorious prison, while wealthy whites were “living in luxury having electric light all through his house even in his kitchen.”<sup>109</sup> Throughout the course of the meetings, O’Neal and other speakers unpacked the power structure of the colony. Relating the tenets of socialism, O’Neal explained to his followers that wealthy Barbadians owned the wealth that the lower classes produced with their labor. He also exposed the various cultural mechanisms employed by the wealthy to keep Barbadian laborers subservient, in particular the Anglican Church. In one meeting, he argued “that the preachers are always telling the poor people not to mind being poor as the Bible says that they...must not store up their treasures on earth,” but this was only “to keep them down while the upper class ‘make this earth their heaven.’”<sup>110</sup> Yet, similar to the problem faced by UNIA organizers, the only way to attract Barbadian workers to the meetings was to incorporate religious messages and teachings, and all meetings included prayers and hymns. Barbadian radical meetings often included this unique mix of socialism, pan-Africanism, and Christianity.

Despite the revolutionary potential of WMA messages, the meetings also revealed the fact that both the organizers and workers who attended the meetings viewed themselves as firmly ensconced within the British Empire. Similar to UNIA meetings, WMA speakers proclaimed their loyalty to King George, and remembered how “Queen Victoria and others have freed us” from slavery.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, the Barbadian WMA saw itself as an internationalist organization in league with British laborers, expressing their rights as English workers. Speakers often discussed the efforts of trade unions in Great Britain, and gave impassioned speeches when the Labour Party won British elections, proclaiming that it would “come to our rescue.”<sup>112</sup> Many

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<sup>109</sup> BDA, GH 4/36, Letter to Inspector of Police, April 11, 1927.

<sup>110</sup> BDA, GH 4/36, Letter to Inspector of Police, May 13, 1927.

<sup>111</sup> BDA, GH 4/36, Letter to Inspector of Police, June 11, 1927.

<sup>112</sup> BDA, GH 4.36, Brathwaite to Detective Sargeant, June 20, 1929.



spoke of Labour Party leader Ramsay MacDonald as working not only for British workers, but also for laborers across the empire. This connection was a deeply personal one. Speakers proclaimed the Labour leader's speeches as if they had been given to the Barbados WMA members directly, relaying how MacDonald "said we must demand fair wages, he didn't tell us to knock down any body building."<sup>113</sup>

This combination of radical critique with expressions of Britishness characterized both UNIA and WMA meetings throughout the 1920s. Activists and speakers rarely condemned the British Empire, instead reserving their criticism for white Barbadian elites, local power structures, and the broader system of capitalism. At this juncture, Barbadian activists did not want to escape the British imperial system, but rather to carve out a greater sphere of rights and liberties within it. In general, the WMA meetings show how Barbadian activists and workers utilized a multiplicity of discourses ranging from socialism to imperial loyalty to address systemic inequality in Barbados and claim for themselves the privileges of British imperial citizenship. Furthermore, imagined ties to labor organizations in other islands as well as England evoked a powerful imagined linkage between Barbadian workers and laborers the world over that transcended the geographical isolation of the island colony.

While WMA meetings attracted large crowds, the organizers faced difficulty expanding membership rolls due to employer intimidation. The autocratic elites who controlled the island worked to maintain working-class powerlessness and ensure that participating in political organizations came at a high cost. Estate managers often threatened to dismiss laborers who were members of the association, and used other forms of coercion to preclude political activism.<sup>114</sup> As one former WMA president later recalled, "the people were not free to join the Association,

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<sup>113</sup> BDA, GH 4/37a, Brathwaite to Detective Inspector, August 3, 1927.

<sup>114</sup> BDA, GH 4/36, Letter to Inspector of Police, April 29, 1927.

because, if they did so, they were victimized. Whenever we went anywhere to hold meetings, certain persons would send representatives to see whether any of their labourers or servants were there, and, if so, they were dismissed as once.”<sup>115</sup> As WMA leaders worked to unite working class Barbadians against economic and racial exploitation, the local oligarchy used its economic and political power in the island to intimidate potential members and undercut the movement. Yet, the appeal of race- and class-based organizations remained a powerful force in an unequal society like Barbados.

Colonial officials continued to receive dispatches about O’Neal and the WMA, and worried about the appeal that such an organization had for disenfranchised, poor, and sick black workers. They were relieved, then, when the Barbadian legislature finally agreed to a local Public Health Commission to consider the problems with Barbadian public health in 1925. The Colonial Office hoped that the Public Health Commission could help “fix” some of the grievances of poor Barbadians and therefore remove the incentive to join radical organizations. It seemed that the “development cure” for colonial unrest and disorder would finally come to fruition in the British Empire’s most unhealthy colony.

## **Conclusion**

By the mid-1920s, as Barbadian political activists mounted increasing challenges to the squalid conditions endured by the working classes, both metropolitan medical experts and government officials came to believe that preventing diseases and improving the general well-being of colonial subjects would pacify popular discontent in the colonies. Most Barbadians did not join radical groups, due to fear, colonial loyalty, the culture of respectability, and autocratic white rule. Yet, the revolutionary potential of radical movements frightened colonial rulers, and

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<sup>115</sup> Testimony of F.A. Small, in W.A. Beckles, ed., *The Barbados Disturbances: Review of the Situation, Reproduction of the Evidence, and Report of the Commission* (Bridgetown, Barbados: The Advocate Co., 1937), 104.

the tactics of welfare were meant to alleviate the conditions of poor, black Barbadian workers and cultivate peace. The British government's pursuit of health reform in Barbados came as a result of a series of negotiations that occurred both at the official, elite level between the British government and its expert advisors and at the local level as creole physicians like John Hutson used intimate knowledge of Barbadian health to lobby for change. Rather than a simple attempt to exert power over the bodies of the colonized through medicine or make the tropics "safe" for Europeans to live, public health policies became a way for Britain to convince both its subjects and the wider world that colonial peoples benefitted from European trusteeship. Pressuring the Barbados government to reform its public health administration reflected Britain's faith in knowledge and science to fix colonial problems.

At the same time, this articulation of trusteeship was not a significant departure from previous understandings of British responsibility for the colonies. The Colonial Office still expected Barbados to tend to its own affairs, and finance its own reforms. The Treasury would not pay for development initiatives, nor did the Colonial Office wish to get involved. Despite the horrors contained within the NCCVD reports, the British government firmly believed in colonial self-sufficiency. Trusteeship was not about intervention, but about cultivating Britain's reputation as a benevolent colonial power.

The British government's policy on trusteeship was outlined by the Devonshire Declaration of 1923, in which the Colonial Office expressed its mission in Kenya "as the protection and advancement of the native races" in which "the interests of the African natives must be paramount." In doing so, the Colonial Office aligned itself against the settler population in Kenya. Yet, it was difficult to "make trusteeship stick" when it meant having to use force

against stubborn white populations in Africa.<sup>116</sup> The tensions in native versus settler policy would cause continual problems and headaches in the African colonies, and the same would occur in Barbados. When the Barbadian government agreed to investigate the public health administration in 1925, it seemed like the policy of exerting pressure and allowing colonies to “fix” themselves would work. The Public Health Commission’s recommendations would align satisfactorily with the British Government’s increasing faith in the use of scientific knowledge and “modern” medicine to navigate colonial tensions. As new imperial initiatives to address the health and sanitation of the empire emerged in the mid-1920s, however, trouble was brewing on the ground. In Barbados, the longstanding ties between health administration and anxieties over white creole rule would uniquely complicate efforts to convince Barbadian laborers that the British Empire was on their side. The battle over health and welfare in Barbados was only beginning.

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<sup>116</sup> Ronald Hyam, “Bureaucracy and ‘Trusteeship’ in the Colonial Empire,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 4, *The Twentieth Century*, 269-271.

## Chapter Four

### Public Health and Elite Power in Barbados

#### Introduction

Over the course of the early 1920s, the miserable conditions exposed by public health surveys combined with agitation on the ground led British officials to believe that reforming the health and sanitation of Barbados would relieve the misery of Barbadian laborers, reinforce elite control of the island, and restore Barbados as one of the most stable colonies in the British West Indies. As nascent political movements like the Democratic League gained traction in the colony, colonial officials hoped that Barbadian elites would adopt the “development cure” as a pacifying effort. Despite longstanding problems with white Barbadian rule, and notwithstanding the European-descended elites’ disregard for the interest of the colony’s laboring classes, members of the British government were confident that Barbadian elites shared a common commitment to preventing unrest on the island. Colonial authorities in London assumed that creole legislators would see the value of ameliorating health conditions, and take action to prevent the disorders of the immediate postwar years and protect peace in the island. Instead, British pressure to reform the public health administration of Barbados would lead to sustained opposition on the part of white Barbadian elites during the late 1920s.

For the British government, the point of public health reform was to strengthen imperial hegemony overseas. As Lenore Manderson has argued, “there were immediate political benefits

of public health, as they both justified the extension of control—embodied by the doctors, judges, district officers, police and sanitary workers—over the population, and took these authoritarian figures into people’s homes.” In an age of trusteeship, particularly, improving colonial welfare “had the political consequence of providing the moral and intellectual basis of colonial rule.”<sup>1</sup> Colonial officials saw medical departments as crucial to any plan to “ameliorate social conditions” and assure the stability of imperial power.<sup>2</sup> According to this logic, investing in health reform would not only allow colonial governments to extend and justify state intervention, but also produce subjects that were peaceful and unlikely to resist imperial oversight. Thus, efforts to develop the medical and sanitary infrastructure became central to, in the words of David Scott, “the politico-ethical project of producing subjects and governing their conduct.”<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, metropolitan officials overestimated the wider appeal of state-sponsored development initiatives as a pacifying measure.

The relative independence of Barbadian elites from direct British rule and its geographical isolation meant that the local government’s interests and worldview remained detached from the priorities and reasoning of the metropolitan government. The relationship between white Barbadian elites and the British government had many similarities to imperial dynamics with British settler colonies in Africa. Increasingly during the interwar period, in particular once the British government made protecting “native interests” a centerpiece of its policy under the Dual Mandate, settlers and government officials clashed over how to administer the colonies. In Kenya, for example, white settlers and colonial officials distrusted each other’s motives, and had conflicting views when it came to local policy. Even though the British government and settlers “shared a racially negative view of African capabilities”, the two groups

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<sup>1</sup> Manderson, *Sickness and the State*, 231.

<sup>2</sup> Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory*, 171-172

<sup>3</sup> Scott, “Colonial Governmentality,” 214.

had contrasting ideas of “racial paternalism produced different solutions.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in Barbados, the British government and local elites differed in their approaches to managing black laborers, even though both groups viewed black Barbadians in similarly contemptuous ways. The manner in which Barbadian oligarchs and vestry members responded to public health reform shows that understandings of health, disease, and governmentality differed dramatically between them and imperial authorities in London.

White Barbadian elites shared other characteristics with British settlers in Africa, such as a profuse attachment to English identity. In African settler colonies, Dane Kennedy has shown that Europeans felt vulnerable, disjointed, and threatened in an alien land in which they were a minority.<sup>5</sup> As a result, settlers in Kenya and Rhodesia constructed a defensive culture that was designed to protect their tenuous hold on white prestige and separate themselves from indigenous Africans. According to Barbara Bush, in settler societies, “the exaggerated Englishness of expatriate culture” pointed to a “threatened society” trying to defend itself.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, despite their power, the Barbadian upper classes were a mostly-white minority group living amongst a large population of desperate and impoverished African-descended laborers. Elite white Barbadians adopted an inflated sense of Englishness to separate themselves from the black masses. Upper-class white Barbadian identity remained intertwined with the romantic notion that they were free English people who had preserved an outpost of Englishness in the Caribbean.

At the same time that Barbadian whites continually reaffirmed their attachment to Englishness, they often resisted British oversight and advice. Barbadian elites shared this contradictory identity with other colonial whites, such as settlers in the Dominions. For instance,

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *Empire State-Building*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> Dane Kennedy, *Islands of White: Settler Society and Culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance*, 79.

according to Alison Bashford's analysis of white Australians, there existed simultaneously "the nationalism of white Australians partially separating themselves from British rule, but at the same time thoroughly identifying as Britons."<sup>7</sup> In Barbados, contradictory identity politics had a long and specific purpose of defending local rule. According to Mary Chamberlain, Barbadian whites "were both proud and protective of their identity as *Barbadians*," even when declaring an attachment to English culture.<sup>8</sup> As David Lambert has shown for the decades leading to emancipation, white creoles employed conflicting discourses to stake a claim for local control and resistance to abolition. White Barbadians struggled against metropolitan abolitionists who portrayed slaveowners as degenerate and, therefore, un-English. In response, white Barbadians portrayed themselves as loyal Britons living in a "Little England." On the other hand, white Barbadians employed oppositional discourses portraying themselves as besieged colonists suffering under British dominion.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in the 1920s, white Barbadians used contradictory identity politics to oppose British health policy due to different understandings of the best way to administer the colony.

Policies to reform health administration threatened local elites in a far more profound way than reluctance to increase public expenditure on sanitation. When white Barbadian elites embarked on a campaign to oppose public health reform in the late 1920s, their resistance to change shed further light on the structures of white Barbadian power. Similar to white planters in rural Georgia, Barbadian elites worked to keep the local government small so that "that little power would be delegated to the public sphere; most power would remain as personal wealth, personal connections, and personal capacity for violence."<sup>10</sup> Within this context, British

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<sup>7</sup> Bashford, *Imperial Hygiene*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Chamberlain, *Empire and Nation-Building in the Caribbean*, 101.

<sup>9</sup> Lambert, *White Creole Culture*.

<sup>10</sup> Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy*, 175-176.



intervention in a decentralized and hierarchical society such as Barbados threatened to undermine the colony's tenuous social and political order. White resistance to health reform went beyond identity politics; impersonal, expert-influenced, metropolitan directives were foreign and dangerous to the localized rule of Barbadian elites. The resistance of white Barbadian elites to health reform thus reveals both the ways in which they maintained control in the colony, as well as the anxieties and tensions inherent in that power.

Additionally, unlike the British, Barbadian upper classes did not have confidence that improving health conditions would appease and pacify the restive working populations of the island. Rather, as the Barbadian journalist Clennel Wickham would later charge, local elites believed that “the Barbadian labourer will not work if he is not a pauper.”<sup>11</sup> One of the main bases of elite power in Barbados rested in keeping the black laboring masses poor, uneducated, and unhealthy. White elites believed that if Barbadian laborers remained sick, illiterate, and impoverished, they would be less likely to resist the violence and inequality that marked their lives under local elite control. As the Colonial Office pushed to reform public health in Barbados, it would continually find that the House of Assembly would sacrifice the welfare of the colony's population in order to preserve their hold on power in the island. Health policy ultimately became a prism through which the ruling elites of Barbados made the case for their continued control over the government, a struggle that would expose not only anxieties over local rule, but also the tensions that marked British colonial power more widely during the interwar period as colonial subjects posed challenges to imperial rule.

### **The 1925 commission**

When the acting governor, W.E.F. Jackson, appointed the Barbados Public Health Commission in 1925, he did so as a direct response to Devonshire's harsh 1923 dispatch. The

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<sup>11</sup> Clennel Wickham, “People and Things,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, February 4, 1928.

Public Health Commission differed significantly from the Wood and NCCVD commissions of 1921. Comprised primarily of Barbadian doctors and members of the legislature, it was the first locally formed and sanctioned investigation into social conditions in the island. Jackson appealed to the practical effects of health reform in his address to the members, urging the commissioners to heed the advice of the CAMSC in order to prevent “the economic waste caused by insanitary conditions.”<sup>12</sup> The commission selected Dr. J.T.C. Johnson to advise the Public Health Commission as it investigated health conditions in the island. Johnson, a Barbadian physician who had served in the Colonial Service as Principle Medical Officer in Hong Kong, appeared to provide a perfect symbolic liaison between the British government and the elites of the island as he used both his local and imperial knowledge to make suggestions about ways to reform the health administration of the colony.

The Public Health Commission conducted its investigations over the course of a year, beginning in October 1925. In the final report, the commissioners concluded that the main problems with public health in Barbados lay in the fragmented nature of health administration. The Commission had three major complaints about the island’s medical and sanitary organization. First, it criticized the fact that the General Board of Health, the medical body that oversaw health and sanitation within the colony, had no powers to enforce health policies for the entire island. Instead, the power to determine medical and sanitary practices resided completely with individual parishes. Second, the Commission censured the widespread use by the parishes of untrained sanitary commissioners with little medical knowledge to address serious epidemics and sanitation problems. Finally, the Commission lamented the strictly advisory role of current medical and sanitary inspectors in Barbados who had no power to direct or enforce policy. Thus when the Public Health Commission published its report and recommendations in early 1927,

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<sup>12</sup> TNA, CO 28/306/6, The Report of the Public Health Commission, 1925-1926, 2.

their recommendations aimed to make it easier to coordinate health and sanitation policies amongst the various vestries under the direction of expert knowledge.

The Public Health Commission recommended three main changes to health administration in Barbados. First, the Commission advocated remaking the Board of Health into an authoritative body that had executive powers to direct and enforce centralized regulations and preventative measures. Second, the Commission suggested that the Board should be allowed to replace lay parish officials with professional Sanitary Officers. Finally, the Commission endorsed the appointment of a Principal Medical Officer and a Sanitary Officer who would work with the Board of Health to implement preventative measures in the case of an epidemic and make decisions regarding health policy for all of the island's parishes.<sup>13</sup> With its emphasis on professionalization and centralization of medical services, the Commission's findings aligned with the recommendations of the CAMSC, and the Colonial Office expressed satisfaction with the conclusions. In particular, as the continued activism of Charles Duncan O'Neal and local UNIA branches threatened to undermine political stability in the island, British officials hoped that the local government in Barbados would adopt the measures to pacify its restive population.

### **Conflicts over health policy**

Rather than leading to quick reform, the recommendations of the Public Health Commission instead unleashed a concentrated backlash by the planter and merchant elites of the colony. While the Public Health Commission consisted of members of the legislature, the views of the commissioners did not align with those of all elite Barbadians. In fact, the conflicts that would unfold over the issue of medical reform were apparent within the publication of the final recommendations. In a Minority Report on the recommendations, the physician J.W. Hawkins and Assembly member A.J. Hanschell strongly objected to efforts to centralize medical services

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<sup>13</sup> TNA, CO 28/306/6, The Report of the Public Health Commission, 1925-1926.

in the island. The opinion of the dissenting members illustrates a number of problems that the Colonial Office would face in its efforts to urge state-centered reform policies on the ground in Barbados.

The dissenting commissioners used several tactics to articulate their case against public health reform. The first argument rested on the contradictory identity politics that characterized white elite culture in Barbados. White elites had long claimed to be “more British than the British” in order to combat metropolitan assertions that white West Indians had “lost” their Englishness in the tropics.<sup>14</sup> In a contradictory fashion, white elites used the mythology of their essential Englishness not only to defend themselves against critics in the metropole, but also to resist British intervention in local affairs. The ability of Barbadians to decide their own policies made the colony relatively independent, and elites lived in continual fear of losing that independence. White creole elites claimed rights as free-born Englishmen, who intimately understood British law and culture. According to elite logic, it was their duty to protect their quintessentially English institutions. Paradoxically, then, Hanschell and Hawkins used the language of British identity and loyalty to the mother country to defy the reforms urged by the metropolitan government.

The dissenting commissioners focused first on one proposed reform, which would replace lay Sanitary Commissioners with expert medical inspectors in order to improve the filthy conditions endured by much of the island’s poor. The proposed reform threatened the island’s vestry structure, which assured elite control over local affairs. The vestry system was based on an early modern English system, and many Barbadian elites viewed this as integral to what made Barbados “Little England.” Hawkins and Hanschell warned that employing expert professionals

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<sup>14</sup> Karl Watson, *The Civilised Island Barbados: A Social History 1750-1816* (Barbados: Caribbean Graphic Production, 1979), 41; Lambert, *White Creole Culture*, 38-39.

would undermine the historically “English” vestries that relied upon volunteers, not paid professionals. In their view, removing parish control over medical services would damage the administrative system of “an ever British colony like Barbados.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the commissioners contradictorily used their British identity to oppose British-backed reforms. The opposition of Hawkins and Hanschell to vestry reform was also based on material concerns. Replacing lay inspectors with expert advisors could potentially lead to greater public expenditure, and the dissenting commissioners wanted to prevent increased taxes for wealthy landowners.

While fiscal responsibility and protecting control over local affairs were important, there were other more ominous components to Barbadian elite logic that were central to the ideological foundations of upper-class attitudes toward health reforms. Hawkins and Hanschell adopted a horrific rationale to explain and excuse the problems with health conditions in the colony. The two commissioners used Malthusian and social Darwinist reasoning to justify high mortality rates as a natural solution for overpopulation. According to Hawkins and Hanschell, “the death-rate must be high in proportion to the high birth-rate, in order to keep the population down to its present saturated point.”<sup>16</sup> This callous explanation reflected the logic of Barbadian elite power. While the Colonial Office believed that reforming health services would alleviate the misery of poor black workers and prevent unrest, the elites of Barbados relied on keeping a high mortality rate and low standard of living to retain their power over Barbadian labor.

Hawkins and Hanschell borrowed from wider ideas of eugenics to advance their arguments against reforming the health administration in the colony. Indicating the attitude of the Barbadian upper classes, they argued that fighting against high infant mortality rates went against the laws of natural selection. Even if the legislature reformed health services in the

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<sup>15</sup> TNA, CO 28/306/6, J.W. Hawkins and A.J. Hanschell, “Minority Report B” to the Report of the Public Health Commission, January 21, 1927.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

colony, the “universal law of nature, ‘The survival of the fittest,’ will, in spite of good sanitation send to the wall as many of the weakest as will nearly equal the number of births.” Using pseudo-scientific theories to dispute the expert medical advice represented in the recommendations, the commissioners made the case that reform would be a fruitless effort. This led to their conclusion that those who died were expendable. “The weakest are mostly the infants and particularly the illegitimates,” they argued. Thus, “this law must act more rigidly in Barbados than in countries not so saturated and where there is room for increase.”<sup>17</sup> Like many other members of the Barbadian elite, Hawkins and Hanschell found the high death rate acceptable as it mostly affected the poorest and, therefore in their opinion, the most unfit members of society. Instead of viewing the high infant mortality rate as an indicator of state neglect or a degenerating labor force, some members of the upper class welcomed the infant mortality rate as a natural cure for overpopulation.

British officials found these suggestions troubling. While Britain had its own record of using theories of Social Darwinism and eugenics in its colonial empire, as Helen Tilley has argued, by the 1920s imperial officials were trying to distance themselves from the explicit use of these ideas in their policies.<sup>18</sup> Colonial officers called the rhetoric old-fashioned and resonant with discredited late-nineteenth-century ideas.<sup>19</sup> The governor of Barbados, W.C.F. Robertson, wrote to Secretary of State for the Colonies Leo Amery that “it is curious that in this or any country it should be suggested by two leading citizens that a Government should deliberately adopt as a solution of any such problems, a system under which the majority of its inhabitants should be required to acquiesce in the sacrifice of their offspring in order to satisfy economic

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory*, 258-259.

<sup>19</sup> TNA, CO 28/306/10, Minute by R. Sedgewick, May 3, 1927.

conditions.”<sup>20</sup> Two years later, when the former governor of Jamaica, Sydney Olivier, was in Barbados to investigate economic problems in the island, he referred darkly back to these ideas by commenting to the recalcitrant Assembly that Barbadians had “infant mortality as a substitute for emigration.”<sup>21</sup> As Britain attempted to prove to its colonies that it prioritized their health and welfare, the cruel policies of Barbadian elites threatened to sabotage British efforts to repair its relationship with its poor black subjects.

When the House of Assembly received the recommendations of the Public Health Commission, the legislature did everything possible to delay implementing the reforms. Despite the Assembly’s great power in the colony, it was not in a position to reject the measures outright. The Commission’s recommendations received widespread support not only from the Barbadian laboring population, but also the black and colored middle classes of the island who would found the moderate reforms proposed by the Commission as necessary measures to correct the appalling conditions in the colony. While the restricted franchise typically assured upper-class control over the legislature, Assembly members still had to remain sensitive to the interests of the small number of middle-class Barbadian voters or risk losing a seat in the legislature to a middling candidate. The legislature’s first tactic, then, was to postpone acting on the recommendations until the Assembly’s own Special Committee deliberated on the proposals. In the process, Assembly members hoped that the public would forget about the proposed legislation and they could quietly dispose of the legislation a year later.

As the Assembly delayed acting on the Public Health Commission’s recommendations, the legislature’s debates over other proposed health legislation revealed that the elite members would never accept even minor reform to health conditions in the colony. In mid-1927, a debate

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<sup>20</sup> TNA, CO 28/306/10, Robertson to Amery, April 13, 1927.

<sup>21</sup> Clennell Wickham, “People and Things,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, October 26, 1929, 4.

over a bill to increase the number of notifiable diseases underscored the tactics used by Barbadian elites to protect their power. The bill, which would require physicians to report cases of dysentery and typhoid to the General Board of Health in order to prevent epidemics, faced widespread opposition within the legislature. Assembly members adopted the tactic of pointing to the most extreme possibilities of the legislation. H. Graham Yearwood, one of the most conservative members of the Assembly, decried the bill as “drastic” and warned that, if passed, any person could be suspected of having a disease and forcibly quarantined. As he stated, “It might be a Crown Colony method of doing business but there is no free country where such a proposition would be made into law.”<sup>22</sup> His reference to Crown Colony rule preyed upon some of the deepest fears of Barbadian elites, who valued their historic independence from direct British oversight.

More than fear of losing their independence from Britain, however, elite rhetoric reflected a fear of losing the freedom to exploit Barbadian labor and maintain white upper-class political power in the colony. Yearwood and his allies used the most extreme language possible to browbeat the rest of the legislature into refusing all concessions. The conservative members cautioned that the legislation gave physicians a foothold for “an abuse of power” while predicting that it would “reduce the liberty of the subject to practically nothing.” These references to the threats to Barbadian freedom and fears of abuses were coded warnings to the legislature that if it allowed any other groups to have a say in how the island was administered, from the British government to physicians, it would undermine the elites’ extensive system of control over Barbadian labor and politics. This tactic prevailed, as the Assembly decided not to adopt the bill.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, as the legislature and other local officials in the colony continued

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<sup>22</sup> TNA, CO 28/306/7, House of Assembly debates, July 8, 1927.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



to fight any efforts of reform, their indifference to the problems of health administration in the island began to attract increasing criticism not only from the Colonial Office and their scientific experts, but also from the Barbadian public.

These tensions came to light when the Assembly's Select Committee, appointed to consider the Public Health Commission's recommendations, finally finished its deliberations in early 1928. The committee, chaired by Yearwood, ultimately objected to most of the reforms in some way. Fearing that the reforms would circumvent elite control over the workings of the vestries, the committee opposed restructuring the Board of Health to give it executive powers over health policy in the parishes. Additionally, the committee voted that the Principal Medical Officer should only be allowed to have advisory duties, robbing the position of its power. Finally, it simply ignored the stipulation that professional inspectors should replace local Sanitary Officers.<sup>24</sup> Under the committee's advice, the administration of health and sanitation in Barbados would remain the same. While this tactic meant to protect elite hegemony over local affairs, the resulting criticism and backlash from the Barbadian public that threatened their hold on power nonetheless.

The actions of the Select Committee faced widespread backlash from the Barbadian press of all political persuasions, indicating increasing popular opposition towards the House of Assembly. When the Public Health Commission carried out its investigations, local newspapers had followed and debated their actions and recommendations eagerly. Thus when the Select Committee rejected most of the reforms, local news outlets were outraged. The *Herald*, under Clennell Wickham's editorship, followed the Committee's discussions with disgust and placed the debate within the context of the class struggles in the colony. Pointing to the reticence of the

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<sup>24</sup> TNA, CO 28/306/6, Report of the Select Committee, appointed to report on the governor's message of April 9, 1927 and the report of the Public Health Commission, n.d.

Assembly to allow the appointment of a Principal Medical Officer with some powers of administration, the paper condemned the “diehard Tories” who would do anything to prevent reform, even “shed the last drop of blood of the working classes if necessary.”<sup>25</sup> The attitude of the Select Committee signaled to the writers of the *Herald* and the Barbadian laborers who read the paper that the House of Assembly cared only for their own personal power in the island. It became increasingly apparent to the Barbadian public that the legislature was willing to sacrifice the health and lives of the masses to maintain their political dominance.

This attitude was not confined to the more radical writers and readers of the *Herald*, either, as the normally moderate *Barbados Advocate*, read by the black and colored middle classes, published a blistering attack of the Select Committee’s conclusions. The *Advocate* had also praised the findings of the Public Health Commission, lauding the expert advice of Dr. Johnson and the “strong hand of the Colonial Office” in urging the reform of health and sanitation in the colony. For that reason, the Select Committee’s refusal to implement most of the reforms brought the *Advocate*’s ire. Labeling the report a “valueless and pernicious document”, it accused Yearwood and the other members of having no regard for the interest of the public. “The deep prejudice against changing a system within which nepotism and wire-pulling flourish luxuriantly is only too apparent,” they wrote, and predicted that if left to the House of Assembly, “the reform of the medical and sanitary services of the island will never be carried out.”<sup>26</sup> While the Assembly members refused to pass health reform legislation to protect their position in the colony, their refusal to comply was stirring increasing public backlash and criticism—an outcome that the Colonial Office had tried to prevent by reforming public health in the island.

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<sup>25</sup> “Public Health and the House of Assembly,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, January 28, 1928, 4.

<sup>26</sup> TNA, CO 28/306/6, “The Old, Old Story,” *Barbados Advocate*, January 17 1928, 8.

Nevertheless, the House of Assembly pressed on in their refusal to adopt reform. Despite public outcry, Barbadian elites still viewed the centralization of medical services as a greater threat to their power than popular discontent. When the legislature voted on the recommendations of both the Public Health Commission and the Select Committee, it sided with the latter. While the legislature created the posts of Principal Medical Officer and Sanitation Officer, it removed any power that these positions had under the Commission's recommendations and restricted the duties as inspecting, reporting, and advising without executive authority. Should local parish authorities choose to ignore the recommendations of the officers, the officials could do nothing to enforce their own policies, even in the case of a severe epidemic.<sup>27</sup> Under the direction of the House of Assembly, public health and sanitary administration in Barbados remained essentially unchanged.

As disputes over public health policies brought increasing awareness of the extent of the House of Assembly's indifference to the public, it led more to take the side of the governor and colonial officials while blaming the local state. This aspect made Barbados unique in the context of wider efforts to implement health reform policies following the war. In many other locales, struggles over policies of health, welfare, and development occurred between imperial officials and resistant indigenous populations.<sup>28</sup> However, as the Barbadian House of Assembly continued to curtail and block the measures, British-backed efforts to restructure health and sanitation were met with popular support. British reform policies demonstrated to many in the Barbadian middle and lower classes that the local state was indifferent to the needs of the population while metropolitan colonial authorities were willing to help. As Wickham wrote in the *Herald*, "This is why Governor after Governor has had to give up in despair the attempt to hustle Barbados into

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<sup>27</sup> TNA, CO 28/306/6, Robertson to Amery, January 19, 1928.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Mariola Espinosa, *Epidemic Invasions: Yellow Fever and the Limits of Cuban Independence, 1878-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) and Lewis, *Empire State-Building*.

line. There is no response.”<sup>29</sup> As the conflicts continued, the Barbadian public would continue to see the contradictions of local elite rule while looking to the British government for aid.

### **Malaria and popular backlash**

As the House of Assembly continued to postpone its consideration of the Public Health Commission’s recommendations, a severe malaria epidemic broke out in the parish of St. James in the marshy west coast of the island. This event made the problems of Barbadian health administration even more apparent. Malaria was not an illness endemic to Barbados, as the *anopheles* mosquitos that carry the illness are not native to the island. However, in 1927 some *anopheles* eggs were accidentally carried to Barbados on the clothing of workers returning from Cuba. During the resulting epidemic, as thousands of Barbadians suffered from illness and death, local elites refused to concede to the direction of medical experts and the British government for fear that any compromise would diminish their hold on local power. Their callous attitude came under increasing scrutiny not only within the island, but also internationally as the epidemic worsened.

Mosquito-borne diseases, such as yellow fever, had long been a fraught issue in Barbados. The malaria epidemic was no exception to this historical trend. Medical experts and the vestries quarreled over the responsibility of local parishes to pay for mosquito treatment, which could potentially cause the parishes to increase local taxes. The planter and merchant elites who controlled local vestry politics usually refused to pay for initiatives that did not directly benefit their economic and political interests. In the case of malaria, while the disease affected everyone in the island, like most other epidemic illnesses, it disproportionately affected the poorest classes. Thus, when in 1927 the Board of Health found widespread evidence of malaria-carrying *anopheles* mosquitoes in St. James, the parochial commissioners made no effort to treat

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<sup>29</sup> Clennell Wickham, “People and Things,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, February 4, 1928, 4.

mosquito-breeding locations. As a result a severe epidemic ensued, which infected at least 1,250 people by the end of 1927.<sup>30</sup>

With malaria in the colony at epidemic levels, the Colonial Office became increasingly frustrated with the indifference of colonial elites to the distress of the colony's laboring population. In a series of dispatches, British officials pressured the House of Assembly to act and allow the metropolitan government to send help. The House reluctantly agreed to appoint Dr. J.T.C. Johnson, the consultant for the Public Health Commission, as a special adviser to the Board of Health to organize ways to combat the disease. Nevertheless, this concession remained limited by the problems of health administration in the island. Both the Board and Dr. Johnson had no power to enforce their proposed policies, so the two could only give advice. With no incentive to follow the Board and Dr. Johnson's requests, the St. James Commissioners rejected the proposals, ostensibly for financial reasons.<sup>31</sup> Because local elites believed that the only way to protect their privileged position was to keep the black masses as poor and helpless as possible, local officials refused to expend parish resources on malaria prevention.

As the epidemic worsened and both local and imperial pressure mounted, the House of Assembly tried to shift the blame to Dr. Johnson. When the doctor directed the parish commissioners to treat standing water sources, the legislature decried his efforts as an assault on its freedom to direct local affairs as it wished. The members worked to frame him as a power-hungry saboteur of the colony's historic independence in the hopes that other Barbadian elites and the aspiring middle classes would view his efforts as a threat to their economic and political power. Recounting the criticisms of the doctor, the leftist columnist Wickham at the *Herald* wrote that "One lusty representative has called him a Czar, which is as every one knows, one

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<sup>30</sup> TNA, CO 28/306/6, Robertson to Amery, January 19, 1928.

<sup>31</sup> TNA, CO 28/308/9, Robertson to Passfield, September 6, 1929.

degree farinheit above a bolshevik [*sic*].”<sup>32</sup> This rhetoric made it appear that the House of Assembly and parish authorities, by refusing to comply with his orders, were actually protecting Barbados from the doctor’s overreach. By using this loaded language that suggested centralized absolute authority, the legislature played upon the fears of the colony’s elite and professional classes while deflecting attention away from their own failure to address local problems.

As Assembly members railed against Dr. Johnson’s efforts, more and more of the public came to see the legislature as more concerned with their own positions than with the lives of most Barbadians. The moderate *Advocate*, for instance, pointed to the Assembly’s indifference to the malaria outbreak as evidence that the legislators would rather preserve their own power than come to public aid.<sup>33</sup> Wickham at the *Herald* agreed, condemning their bald efforts to protect their own political interests over the obvious suffering of the colony’s population. He became especially incensed when, after the doctor took pity on the starving and malaria-infected residents of St. James and provided food, the legislature accused him of “wasting” public money on food distribution. To him, their callous actions undermined “the value of representative institutions” in the colony. He proposed that “some other method of governing Barbados must be devised” if political power were to “remain in the hands of a narrow and oligarchical landed ‘aristocracy.’”<sup>34</sup> While the upper classes of Barbados continually referenced direct British rule and Crown Colony government as a political bogeyman in contrast to the benefits of local elected rule, their refusal to address the worst problems of the colony exposed the farce of the existing “representative” government.

The scandal over the malaria epidemic and struggles over health policy unfolded both within and outside of the colony, as the inaction of parish officials and the House of Assembly

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<sup>32</sup> Clennell Wickham, “People and Things,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, February 4, 1928, 4.

<sup>33</sup> TNA, CO 28/306/6, “The Old, Old Story,” *Barbados Advocate*, January 17 1928, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Clennell Wickham, “People and Things,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, February 4, 1928, 4.

also attracted international attention. Foreign news outlets followed the devastating epidemic closely, blaming the incompetence of the House of Assembly and the existing public health administration in the colony for the death and misery that characterized Barbados. Referring to legislative efforts to build a casino in the colony to attract tourists, the *Herald* scoffed that the malaria outbreak was bringing more publicity to Barbados “and will do more harm to her reputation all over the world than half a hundred Casinos” could repair. Indeed, newspapers from Trinidad to New York carried stories not about the Barbadian climate and tourist attractions, but about the disease that marked the island.<sup>35</sup> Headlines such as “Over two thousand cases in Six Weeks” and “Mosquito Plague in Barbados” depicted the colony as a destination of horrors, warning that “scores are reported as dying weekly.”<sup>36</sup> Even as backlash over the epidemic threatened the island’s tourism industry, colonial elites refused to compromise.

Black newspapers in the United States were particularly vocal regarding the problems in Barbados highlighted by the malaria epidemic. Their interest, which was due both to the high number of West Indian migrants who lived in the United States as well as pan-African concerns in colonies with large black populations, brought the problems of Barbados into the center of diasporic interchanges. The editor of the African-American paper *The Philadelphia Tribune*, himself of Barbadian descent, derided the conditions in the colony as well as the local government structure. As he wrote, “the governmental authorities have just allowed themselves to be advertised rather extensively as the most unhealthy island in the West Indies, as a place where people are ‘dying like flies’” from a disease.”<sup>37</sup> As the international press published

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<sup>35</sup> “Malaria Epidemic in Barbados,” *The Times*, December 8, 1927, 7; “Mosquito Plague in Barbados,” *New York Age*, February 4, 1928, cited in Clennell Wickham, “People and Things,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, February 18, 1928, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Clennell Wickham, “People and Things,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, February 18, 1928, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Eustace Gay, “1912-Barbados-1928,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, March 24, 1928, 4.

damning reports about the condition of the island, it broadcast not only the incompetence of local officials, but also cast a shadow upon British trusteeship in the colony.

As the scope of the crisis moved from the local to the international arena, the Colonial Office became anxious to stave off the epidemic and prevent further damage. From London, the Secretary of State for the Colonies sent a heated dispatch to the House of Assembly, admonishing them regarding the malaria problem. The communication sparked hope amongst the Barbadian laborers that the British government would intervene directly. The indifference of the legislature to the problems of the community led large sectors of the Barbadian public to support British intervention over local jurisdiction. The left-wing *Herald*, for instance, criticized the legislature for “acting on the principle that we are masters in our own House” rather than submitting to imperial directives. Expressing great confidence in the capabilities of the British Empire, the paper warned that the Colonial Office “possesses reserves of power of which the average representative is unaware” and cautioned that “Barbados cannot expect to receive ‘suggestions’ from the Colonial Office” forever, and the British government would surely intervene soon to save the masses.”<sup>38</sup> As conflicts over public health reform and the malaria epidemics continued to expose the problems of local rule, some Barbadians looked to the British government to fulfill its supposed duty to subject populations.

Despite imperial pressure, Barbadian officials remained reluctant to spend local resources on the epidemic. However, the attention of international presses to malaria in Barbados began to affect trade and tourism on the island. Local business interests began to voice their concerns for the epidemic’s economic implications, and the St. James commissioners relented in their resistance to Dr. Johnson’s suggestions. The commissioners took more aggressive measures that

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<sup>38</sup> “The Colonial Office and Barbados,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, March 17, 1928, 4.



helped to finally combat a more serious epidemic. Nevertheless, in spite of the affect on tourism and the threat to the island's economic and business interests that the epidemic exposed, the legislature continued to stall every other effort to reform health conditions in the colony. Its defiance pointed to the deeper reasons behind their resistance to health reform that went beyond simply refusing to spend money on issues that did not benefit elites. Instead, it pointed to the ideology of white rule in Barbados. Unlike the British government, Barbadian upper classes believed that the solution to the radicalism and instability of the interwar years was not change and reform, but retrenchment.

Two years later, when another malaria outbreak threatened Christ Church parish, the Barbadian government once again declined to take immediate action. Despite the international and local backlash to the epidemic of 1927, when health inspectors found large numbers of malaria-carrying mosquito larvae in mid-1929, the Christ Church commissioners of health declined to spend parish funds on sanitary work.<sup>39</sup> Once again, the attitude of local authorities demonstrated to the Barbadian public the contradictions and failures of elite rule. Responding to the statement of one Assembly member, who claimed that the commissioners' actions were justified because the Christ Church vestry was "a free body representing the free electors of the parish" that did not have to answer to the Board of Health. Wickham scoffed at the reasoning of the ruling elite. He pointed to the paradox that while the commissioners spoke of their freedom and independence, they also begged for money from the central government and relied upon outside help for the running of local affairs.<sup>40</sup> The politics of public health exposed and undermined the logic of elite rule.

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<sup>39</sup> TNA, CO 28/308/9, Robertson to Passfield, September 6, 1929.

<sup>40</sup> Clennell Wickham, "People and Things," *Barbados Weekly Herald*, May 11, 1929, 6.

This time, the Board of Health decided to take more drastic measures and appealed to the governor for help. Governor Robertson, who agreed with the Board's fears about Christ Church, helped to introduce a bill into the House of Assembly that would grant the Board emergency powers over the local commissioners to prevent the epidemic. When the House received the bill, the few members that were on the Board of Health backed the legislation. While stating their reluctance to resort to aggressive measures, the members argued that the actions of the Christ Church commissioners were "dangerous to the community" and made drastic measures necessary.<sup>41</sup> Members of the Assembly who were physicians, or worked closely with the medical community, saw the dangers of malaria and understood the effect that unchecked epidemics had on the Barbadian population.

The rest of the House of Assembly, however, reacted furiously to this supposed threat to their authority. C.L. Elder, one of the Christ Church commissioners, condemned the bill and warned that if the House passed it the legislature would be setting a precedent "and one of these days you will come here and suddenly find a Bill before you to abolish the constitution of the colony."<sup>42</sup> As usual, conservative Assembly members used the most extreme logic possible to rally others to their side. This link between reforming public health administration and losing local power was a common rhetorical tactic used by members of the Barbadian government.

Additionally, the controversy over the Board of Health and the malaria epidemic demonstrates how the two Assembly members of African descent protected their tenuous position amongst the Barbadian power elite by embracing conservative and reactionary rhetoric. As Anne Spry Rush has argued about middle-class black West Indians, embracing a respectable "British" identity allowed black creoles to establish that they had an important role to play within

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<sup>41</sup> BDA, House of Assembly debates, July 2, 1929, 408-409.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 410-413.

the British Empire and thus had the power to negotiate the terms of their political and cultural participation within it.<sup>43</sup> Middle-class black Barbadians occupied a tenuous position with the colony's racial and economic structure, and class interests usually trumped alliances of race. Middle-class black Barbadians often used their grasp of British culture to jockey for a place in the local government and earn the favor of elites. In this instance, resistance to health reform became one of the many lenses through which some middle-class Barbadians of color made a case for wider inclusion into the social and political order.

H.W. Reece and C.A. Brathwaite were at the forefront of the opposition to the bill. Despite the fact that malaria epidemics disproportionately affected the black population of the island, the two legislators adopted the same language as white Assembly members to oppose the bill. Reece, borrowing from conservative tactics, warned that if they allowed the Christ Church commissioners to be superseded, the House of Assembly could be next.<sup>44</sup> This association between compromise and losing all control over local affairs worked as political currency for Assembly members of African descent. C.A. Brathwaite took it a step further by drawing upon elite tropes of ancient privileges and a historic English identity. According to him, the measure was “an insidious attack upon the ancient rights and privileges” of Barbados. “We who boast of being Little Englanders, let us show that we are made of better stuff than that which the Executive expects us to be.” By embracing the invented traditions of elite rule, Brathwaite was able to frame himself as English and protect his position within the historically white legislature.<sup>45</sup> The attitudes of the two black legislators show that while white elites resisted health reform to protect their power in the colony, some nonwhite Barbadians resisted reform to

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<sup>43</sup> Rush, *Bonds of Empire*.

<sup>44</sup> BDA, House of Assembly debates, July 2, 1929, 418.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 414-415.

make a claim for belonging in the upper classes. Despite differing motivations, these class interests united the legislature in opposition to change.

When the House of Assembly refused to grant the Board emergency powers, Governor Robertson grew exasperated with the legislature. He met with the Board of Health and the Christ Church commissioners and, after much persuasion, the commissioners agreed to look after water treatment in their parish. Nevertheless, the House of Assembly was embittered with the governor's initial attempt to supersede local control by giving emergency powers to the Board of Health. Even though the commissioners agreed to treat the affected water sources, the legislature rejected the original order of the Board of Health to treat the water in the parish, which undercut the ability of the commissioners to act.<sup>46</sup> The debacle brought Robertson to a fury as he complained that the House could reject the bill, but it could not “hope for any successful Health administration if they tacitly sanction disobedience to directions of an authority constituted by the Legislature.” To him, elite efforts against reform meant that they could no longer defend themselves against charges of indifference to the health of the people that they govern.<sup>47</sup> The House of Assembly would not only sacrifice the lives of thousands of people but also their own legitimacy to show the governor and the British government that it had the power in Barbados.

### **The threat of constitutional crisis**

The struggles over health reforms and malaria epidemics unleashed continual conflict in Barbados between 1927 and 1929, both within and outside the colony. As the Barbadian public, the Colonial Office, and the governor of Barbados became increasingly frustrated with the obstinate legislature, it appeared likely that the local rule in Barbados had reached a breaking point. Beginning in early 1928, as international attention to the 1927 malaria epidemic escalated,

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<sup>46</sup> TNA, CO 28/308/9, Minute by J.M.S. Blood, October 3, 1929.

<sup>47</sup> TNA, CO 28/308/9, Robertson to “Sir Frederick” July 3, 1929.

rumors began circulating that the British government was on the verge of revoking the island's constitution after 300 years of salutary neglect. The struggles that ensued brought Barbados to a place that horrified the British government. While Colonial Officials had assumed that Barbadian elites would go along with their plans to centralize the island's medical services in an attempt to pacify the colony's restive working populations, the policies and concurrent epidemics had instead turned Barbadian elites against Britain and exposed the savagery of local rule to the Barbadian public as well as to the world. Over the next year, the imperial government would be forced to choose whether it would step in on behalf of the island's suffering population or forfeit the battle over public health in order to appease colonial elites.

By February 1928, tensions over the malaria epidemic and disputes over the Public Health Commission led Wickham at the *Herald* to speculate that the legislative gridlock would force Barbados to fight to keep its independence from direct British rule. As he recounted reports in the foreign press, there was "an uneasy feeling abroad that a constitutional crisis is threatening." He placed the blame for this squarely upon local elected officials. Not only did the House of Assembly remain "aligned against the Colonial Office" when it came to policies over health administration, it also set itself against Governor Robertson. Should a constitutional crisis result, Wickham warned that he and his black laboring audience would not fight to maintain a system that kept them under the power of a small elite. "Could the general mass of people be expected to rise in support of the Constitution?"<sup>48</sup> Once again, his words showed how elite refusal to accept public health reform was leading the Barbadian public to prefer direct British rule to local governance.

Tensions over the Barbadian constitution came to a fever pitch when, in March 1928, the British Parliament revoked nearby British Guiana's constitution. British Guiana, in which

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<sup>48</sup> Clennell Wickham, "People and Things," *Barbados Weekly Herald*, February 11, 1928, 6.

governmental power was divided between an executive branch controlled by the planter elite and an elected legislative branch comprised of black and Indian middle classes, had been locked in a state of governmental gridlock for several years. Opposing class interests within the government had brought the production and export of the colony's major raw materials almost to a standstill. The British government, exasperated with the effect that internal disputes were having on British Guiana's economic output, abolished the colony's elected legislature to make it a true Crown Colony government under direct British control.<sup>49</sup> This overhaul represented the greatest fears of the Barbadian elite.

Because of the historic control that the upper classes of Barbados had over the House of Assembly, they were able to direct affairs in Barbados without a lot of interference from either the British government or the disenfranchised Barbadian masses. Elites feared that if they budged and allowed the constitution to be overridden as well, it meant that the governor and the British state could step in and undermine their political power as well as their control over Barbadian labor. Additionally, the revocation of the British Guiana constitution seemed to validate the warnings that Barbadian elites had been making since the health reforms were first proposed. Whether the upper classes believed that constitutional overhaul was a reality or not, it became a convenient and real threat to use against more moderate voices within the legislature who wanted to compromise. The most conservative members of the House of Assembly became even firmer in their opposition to health reform, which they continued to frame as a covert attempt to make Barbados a Crown Colony.

While in the midst of their own dramatic constitutional changes, observers in British Guiana noticed the tensions unfolding in Barbados. The *New Daily Chronicle*, published in British Guiana, reported that friction was growing between the legislature and the governor, and

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<sup>49</sup> Bolland, *The Politics of Labour*, 137.

“various factions are already beginning to line up on one side or the other, in what may yet develop into a first class constitutional struggle.” Pointing out the hysteria that characterized recent House of Assembly debates, one article commented that a showdown over the constitution would not be surprising due to the severe inequality that characterized the island’s political and social structure. It condemned the fact that the House of Assembly represented “a class; not Barbados” and pointed out that Barbados had the lowest level of representation of any British colony that had representative institutions.<sup>50</sup> As the House of Assembly continued to thwart all efforts to reform health and sanitation in the island, the dysfunction of Barbadian local rule became more apparent to observers both within and outside the colony.

As criticism of the Barbadian government mounted, Governor Robertson became even more frustrated at the legislature’s efforts to thwart medical and sanitary reform. As he related in a critical dispatch to the Colonial Office, “Progress and improvement in any direction is slow in Barbados with its oligarchical government, disguised as democratic, intensely conservative, steeped in the tradition of objection to dictation and suspicious of suggestion.” Because of these characteristics, he wrote, House of Assembly members equated health reform with the end of parochial control and the constitution as they knew it. To Robertson, this theory defied logic. “To a stranger, and to any body of experts it must seem inconceivable that in a small Island like Barbados... there should be any hesitation in adopting a system of Central administration of Sanitary and Medical Services as being more efficient than the present method of parochial control,” he wrote. Robertson complained that these problems made Barbados a very difficult place to govern, and he wrote that he had less power and respect in Barbados than other colonies in which he had served. Instead of having the power to implement policy directly as a

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<sup>50</sup> “Constitutional Crisis. Watched By Our Neighbors. A Demerara View. Barbados Lining Up For Squalls,” *New Daily Chronicle*, May 3, 1928. Reprinted in *Barbados Weekly Herald*, May 19, 1928, 3.

representative of the British government, in Barbados he could only use “patience and persuasion” to affect any change.<sup>51</sup>

These disputes between the governor and the House of Assembly persisted as the legislature and local sanitary commissioners continued to refuse to address the problems of public health in the island. Unlike in British Guiana, where the British government chose to support white colonial elites over the colored middle classes, the governmental gridlock that was unfolding in Barbados would ultimately force the Colonial Office to choose between supporting their appointed imperial representative in the colony or the recalcitrant colonial elites who determined policy. Colonial officials still wished to reform the health services of Barbados, a measure supported by Governor Robertson, but were unsure how to coerce their supposed allies within the colonial upper classes into doing their will. The continued debates over health policy in Barbados would reveal the strains of British rule in Barbados, as metropolitan policymakers weighed their attempts to reform health administration with their desire to avoid actual intervention in the colony. This contradiction would make the Colonial Office as well as Governor Robertson appear incompetent in their management of Barbados, and eventually undermine the confidence that the poor black Barbadian had in Britain’s legitimacy as an imperial trustee.

By early 1929, tensions in Barbados remained high over issues of health and sanitary reform. When Assembly members and nominees campaigned for office, their rhetoric centered on whether Barbados would implement any of the proposed policies, which colonial elites continued to portray to the public as a threat to the constitution. During the vestry nominations in the parish of St. Michael, the nominees labeled the three-year effort to reform sanitary administration in Barbados as “the insertion of the thin edge of the wedge of Crown Colony

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<sup>51</sup> TNA, CO 28/307/15, Robertson to Amery, July 1, 1928



Government.” Using health policy as a tool to rally fears and gain political support, candidates pointed to the “awful condition” of British Guiana “as a warning to Barbados,” calling British Guiana’s experience under direct British rule as the worst in its history.<sup>52</sup> This rhetoric was effective when it came to the black middle classes of the colony, who looked to the loss of political power to colored professionals in British Guiana as a warning against British oversight.

Nevertheless, Wickham, commenting on the nominations, continued to point out the hyperbolic nature of the debates. As he noted, the candidates tried to convince the public that “one of the most priceless gems in the Crown of our Constitution is the right of local Boards in eleven parishes to raise and spend money on the roads and on sanitation.” Wickham, however, did not share in the Assembly members’ fear of direct British rule. For, as he pointed out, Crown Colony rule would only affect the power of the elites. He urged the working populations of Barbados not to join in on the calls against Crown Colony rule until they could “strike a bargain” with the ruling class to get a share in the present system.<sup>53</sup> While Barbadian middle classes were growing suspicious of British overreach, Barbadian laborers still saw no benefit to local rule

Struggles between the Barbadian government and the Colonial Office reached new heights as the imperial government worked to fill the post of Chief Medical Officer (CMO), the only reform suggested by the original Public Health Commission adopted in any form. While the House of Assembly had removed any executive power that the position could have, it also restricted the post as much as possible to make it difficult to fill. First, the Assembly stipulated that the appointment could last for only three years. This made the position temporary, meaning that anyone who accepted the post would not be eligible to draw a pension later from the British government. Second, the legislature excluded officers above the age of 45, an age restriction that

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<sup>52</sup> Clennell Wickham, “People and Things,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, January 12, 1929, 6.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

would prevent experienced officers from taking the post.<sup>54</sup> The Colonial Office reacted to the stipulations with dismay, complaining that the restrictions ruled out most physicians within the colonial service.<sup>55</sup> As British officials searched for months to fill the post, the Barbadian legislature succeeded in its efforts to thwart any sort of reform or imperial oversight in the colony.

When the Colonial Office still had not found a suitable candidate by early 1929, it decided to fill the position temporarily with Dr. Rice, a retired English medical officer who had worked in West Africa. While he was too old according to the restrictions of the Barbados legislature, the Colonial Office was desperate to fill the post and hoped that Dr. Rice would ingratiate himself in Barbados and persuade the Assembly to change the age restriction.

Wickham sympathized with the position of the Colonial Office and recognized the problems that the legislature had created in its attempt to preserve political power. Broadcasting to his readers that the House of Assembly was incompetent, he scoffed at their tendency to “imagine they can fight the Secretary of State for the Colonies without brains... We can imagine the junior clerks at the Colonial Office laughing over the efforts of these Colonial planters of Barbados to have a go at Mr Amery.”<sup>56</sup> If it came down to a contest between the Barbadian legislature and the British Empire, Wickham and his sympathizers appeared confident that the mother country would prevail.

The House of Assembly members did try to “have a go” at the Colonial Office as it received the appointment of Dr. Rice with fury. Directing his anger to the British government, Yearwood charged the Colonial Office with neglecting its duties by thinking that “a retired Medical Officer would be quite good enough for this colony,” while S.C. Thorne accused the CO

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<sup>54</sup> TNA, CO 28/308/9, Minute by W. Robertson, July 12, 1928.

<sup>55</sup> TNA, CO 28/308/9, Minute by R.R. Sedgwick, August 13, 1929.

<sup>56</sup> Clennell Wickham, “People and Things,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, February 16, 1929, 4.

of compelling the Barbados government to do its bidding. To him, the Colonial Office was trying to force “any man down our throats.”<sup>57</sup> For the House of Assembly, the appointment of Dr. Rice against their wishes indicated the imperial overreach against which it continually warned. As the debate continued, Yearwood and Thorne took the opportunity to attack the power of the Colonial Office and caution against British aggression. According to Yearwood, the CO expected them “to bow submissively to whatever the authorities at Downing Street say about these appointments” while Thorne warned that they would “not have our hands forced by the Colonial Office or anybody else.”<sup>58</sup>

The extreme rhetoric of Yearwood and Thorne pointed to the tactics and logic of the most conservative elements of the legislature. They trapped the Colonial Office by restricting the CMO so severely that the British government would not be able to find a suitable candidate. Imperial officials had the choice of keeping the post vacant or filling it with someone who did not meet the restrictions—both options that would bring the British government under fire. Some members of the House of Assembly saw this and objected to Yearwood and Thorne, pointing to their own restrictions as the reason for the appointment. However, the majority of the House of Assembly placed the blame directly with colonial officials rather than their own policy. Reactionary members played upon elite fears of losing their power and their sense of inferiority within the empire by disparaging the move as evidence of “how lightly they think of Barbados.” The members used Dr. Rice’s appointment as evidence that Britain neglected Barbados because it saw the colony as a backwater compared to large colonies like Nigeria.<sup>59</sup> As the debates intensified, the Assembly members made it clear how little they thought of British intervention into the established social and political customs of the island.

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<sup>57</sup> *The Official Gazette*, Vol 64 No 9, May 16, 1929, 326.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 327-328.

Furthermore, in order to gain support from the colony's middle classes, white elites embarked on a propaganda campaign to portray the British government as a tyrannical power that was trying to use health reform as an excuse to turn Barbados into a Crown Colony. While middle-class Barbadians had supported British intervention during the worst of the 1927 malaria epidemic, the revocation of British Guiana's constitution in favor of local elites had convinced many within the black and colored professional classes of Barbados that the British Empire would not protect their interests. Even though local rule in Barbados was unequal and dysfunctional, the middle classes still had the hope of one day participating if they worked hard enough to achieve the right to vote. Barbadian upper classes played on these beliefs and fears with their constant warnings against Crown Colony government, British treachery, and imperial mismanagement. When the middle-class *Advocate* commented upon the debates, it seemed to agree with the Assembly's warning against British mismanagement. Accusing the Assembly members who defended Dr. Rice's appointment of siding "the mandarins at Whitehall," the paper speculated that if the conservative members' accusations about Colonial Office neglect and manipulation were true, then Barbados should not stand for it. "Up to a point we are our own rulers and it is both unfair and unwise for the Colonial Office to make encroachments upon our privileges and to seek to curtail our rights to self-government."<sup>60</sup> While the debates over implementing health reform had brought the *Advocate* against the Assembly, doubts about the empire's respect for colonial middle classes brought them back to the legislature's side.

The imperial government reacted with dismay to the attitude of the Barbadian legislature and the *Advocate*. The accusations towards the Colonial Office demonstrated the level of alienation that existed between the metropolitan government and white elite Barbadians. While imperial officers had hoped that Barbadian officials would help them to implement moderate

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<sup>60</sup> TNA, CO 28/308/9, *Barbados Advocate*, May 10, 1929.

health reform in the colony, their reaction to all British initiatives revealed the great gulf that existed between the prerogatives of the empire and those of local elites. Nevertheless, opposing the House of Assembly had its political drawbacks. The British government was unwilling to go through another government overhaul as it had done with British Guiana, a move that had garnered great criticism within the West Indian colonies. More importantly, though, if the British government revoked the Barbadian constitution and removed power from local white elites, it would signal to other colonial upper classes that they did not have the support of the British government and would undermine the relatively stable systems of indirect rule that existed in many areas. Finally, if metropolitan authorities disrupted white elite power in Barbados, it might lead to further radicalism and even revolt from the colony's miserable black poor.

Instead of taking these risks, the Colonial Office began to place the blame for the non-implementation of its policies upon the governor and the other appointed officials in the island, not the legislature. Lord Passfield, the new Secretary of State for the Colonies, reflected the views of Colonial Office staff in a severe dispatch that implicitly blamed Governor Robertson for the feelings of the House of Assembly. Writing to Robertson, he excused the attitude of the legislature towards the appointment of Dr. Rice as "neither surprising nor altogether unreasonable" since the governor had failed to explain the issue to them. Miffed that the CO was being blamed for not appointing an officer, he took Robertson to task for not using his powers of persuasion more effectively and expressed his disappointment in the governor's inability to convey imperial decisions in a way that the House of Assembly would accept. According to the Colonial Office, in Barbados it was the governor's job to cajole and entice illogical white Barbadian elites, so it was Robertson's fault for not communicating to the House "that no medical man of the requisite standing and qualifications would be likely to throw up his practice

and prospects in this country for a three years appointment in Barbados.” He ordered the governor to try harder in convincing the legislature about the difficulties in finding an officer under their existing stipulations.<sup>61</sup> Passfield and the other colonial officers saw the role of the governor in Barbados as a persuader and a soother, and blamed him even when the Assembly acted irrationally. These disputes reveal the divisions at the heart of colonial rule, as the British government had to rely on public relations to enforce their own policies.

Conflicts over Dr. Rice’s appointment, combined with frustration concerning the Assembly’s handling of the malaria crisis, led Robertson to take a severe step. He decided that persuasion and pleading were not enough in the face of the House of Assembly’s power in the island. Clearly, he believed, the legislature would never act to improve the miserable health conditions in the colony. In a secret dispatch to Passfield, he urged drastic measures. Explaining his difficult position, Robertson wrote: “In an independent elected House, with no parties, no Ministers and no leaders, my only means of influencing opinion are personal influence, persuasion and education.” This was not enough to implement colonial policies, as he had no power to affect change in the colony. Further, he wrote, while many even amongst the white elite wanted improvement in the House of Assembly, no one had the courage to vote for reforms. White upper classes all feared “the argument advanced by the opponents that this will mean submission to the views of the Colonial Office, the introduction of Crown Colony Government, curtailment of the powers of the Vestries, with consequent peril to their own privileges.” The climate of reaction and hostility to change in colonial administration brought all legislation to a standstill. He wrote that there was only one way to improve administration, which was the direct intervention of the Secretary of State to amend the constitution.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> TNA, CO 28/308/9, Passfield to Robertson, August 28, 1929.

<sup>62</sup> TNA, CO 28/308/11, Robertson to Passfield, September 6, 1929.

The governor's radical request seemed to fulfill the predictions that had been swirling around Barbados since the health reforms were first introduced. However, the Colonial Office regarded the prospect of direct intervention and constitutional change with distaste. As Gilbert Grindle communicated to the rest of the staff, "Barbados would not surrender the present constitution without a big fight."<sup>63</sup> While officials like E.R. Darnley sympathized with Robertson's contention that constitutional change would be justified due to the terrible public health conditions in the colony, he hesitated taking drastic action. He expressed hope that Barbados would, in a year or so, recognize "the inability of certain of the Colony's ancient institutions to grapple satisfactorily with modern problems" and make changes itself.<sup>64</sup> In general, the British government preferred taking no action, relying instead on the possibility that Dr. Rice's educational and advisory work would eventually sway the legislature. The permanent staff at the Colonial Office was unwilling to expend the financial and political resources to implement their reforms in the colony or take the risks that direct control would lead to greater instability.

In his dispatch to Robertson, Lord Passfield relayed the conclusions of the Colonial Office to the frustrated governor. He maintained that the British government did not have the grounds to intercede and change the constitution, and encouraged the governor to take every chance to "bring to public notice the advantages" of centralization and expert advice, supplementing the educational initiatives of Dr. Rice in spreading awareness throughout the colony. Once again framing the role of imperial representatives in Barbados as persuaders, not executives, he wrote that their combined educational efforts would eventually make Barbadians realize that their institutions had to change. Passfield instead expressed his hope that "some

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<sup>63</sup> TNA, CO 28/308/11, Minute by Gilbert Grindle, October 18, 1929.

<sup>64</sup> TNA, CO 28/308/11, Minute by Edward Darnley, October 17, 1929.

move in the direction of simplification of control may possibly originate with the local authorities concerned.”<sup>65</sup> Rather than alleviate some of the misery in the colony and regain the support of its colonial subjects, the health reforms had only served to expose the dysfunction of the Barbadian government and bring the colony to the brink of a constitutional crisis. While the Colonial Office desired to fulfill its promise of trusteeship, British officials would only implement reform if it required little cost and effort. The struggles surrounding the malaria epidemic caused the Colonial Office to lose confidence in the use of development policies to solve Barbadian problems, and metropolitan officials retreated from pressing for health reform. Ultimately, the dispute over these health reforms revealed that policymakers in London valued the stability of elite rule over the welfare of colonial subjects.

### **Conclusion: Imperial retreat**

By the late 1920s, the governmental structures of Barbados had started to chip away at the Colonial Office’s confidence in adopting health and welfare measures to solve colonial problems. When a West Indies Conference met in Barbados in early 1929, conference attendees requested that the Secretary of the State for the Colonies send experts to all West Indian colonies in order to advise local governments on how to improve existing sanitary conditions.<sup>66</sup> Dr. Stanton at the Colonial Office scoffed at their request. Citing the CO’s recent attempt to send a malaria expert to Barbados to investigate the disease there, he wrote that their proposals “were coldly received and in the event nothing happened.” In general, tours of “the kind contemplated by the resolution are not likely to result in any great benefit.” He predicted that the issues in the medical and sanitary conditions of many of the West Indian colonies could not be quickly remedied by expert advice. According to the Colonial Office, West Indian public health issues

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<sup>65</sup> TNA, CO 28/308/9, Passfield to Robertson, November 8, 1929.

<sup>66</sup> TNA, CO 318/395/3, Resolution passed by the First West Indies Conference, January 31, 1929.



had “their origin in faulty methods of government”.<sup>67</sup> In contrast to the confidence in expert knowledge and commissions of inquiry in the early 1920s, this feeling of defeat reflected the problems of colonial rule in the Caribbean.

The British government would only go so far when it came to urging health and welfare reform. Similar to vaccination campaigns in nineteenth-century India, in which fears of popular resistance prevented the British state from taking a more aggressive approach to medical intervention, colonial officials would eventually retreat from public health reform in Barbados in favor of what David Arnold calls “a gradualist approach to social change” based in persuasion.<sup>68</sup> This approach caused disillusionment for Barbadians who trusted in the capability of Britain to supersede indifferent local elites on behalf of reforms that would benefit the masses. Clennell Wickham, despite his long-enduring praise of British administration over local rule, communicated to his readers his disappointment in British inaction. According to Wickham, Barbadians were proud of their connection to Britain and wished to remain within the empire. Sentiment alone, however, was not enough to sustain these imperial ties. Wickham urged Britain to invest “in the development of these colonies” rather than continue with their neglect. As he wrote, “America is casting longing eyes in our direction, and we can’t deny our dependence upon her.” Although U.S. racism and “lynching” prevented most Barbadians from desiring to be ruled by the power to the north, they also felt overlooked by their mother country.<sup>69</sup> Barbadian laborers believed in promises of British protection, and wanted imperial officials to intervene. Yet, as the metropolitan government remained unwilling to get involved in local affairs, Barbadian laborers began to lose faith in the idea of imperial trusteeship. The efforts to regain

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<sup>67</sup> TNA, CO 318/395/3, Minute by Stanton, April 4, 1929.

<sup>68</sup> Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, 158.

<sup>69</sup> Clennell Wickham, “People and Things,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, October 26, 1929, 4

the loyalty of West Indian subjects were beginning to fray as the financially and politically strained empire grappled with the tensions of colonial administration.

Even some members of the House of Assembly started to see the writing on the wall. In what would be a prophetic warning, Chrissie Brathwaite urged the legislature to alleviate the conditions of the Barbadian poor to engineer social order. During a debate in late 1929, he declared “I say the time has come when works of public utility should be resorted to in order that many of our people who are half-starved today through the lack of employment should be able to get employment in their own country and become even more law-abiding than they have hitherto been. I suggest here from my seat in this House that unless something is done this law-abiding and peaceful people of Barbados must as the result of starvation resort to acts of disturbance in order to satisfy their hunger”. Despite great objection from other Assembly members, Brathwaite maintained that the legislature needed to attend to the needs of suffering Barbadians so that they remained “good citizens not only of Barbados but of the British Empire to which we all feel proud to belong.”<sup>70</sup>

The struggles over health reform in Barbados reveal some of the key factors that defined tensions of late colonialism. First, the aims and outlook of the metropolitan government often clashed with those of local colonial leaders. While British administrators had come to believe in the need to ameliorate poor health conditions to prevent disorder, white Barbadians saw any type of reform as a threat to their power in the island. The conflicting views of colonial officials and white Barbadian elites about preventing black revolt reveal the limitations of colonial knowledge. Metropolitan officials had underestimated the power dynamics of Barbadian society, in particular those of the upper classes. British officials did not realize that metropolitan ideas about how to prevent popular upheaval were essentially at odds with the ideology of the Barbadian

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<sup>70</sup> BDA, House of Assembly debates, October 8, 1929, 523.

government. While the Colonial Office believed that reforming health services would alleviate the misery of poor black workers and prevent unrest, the elites of Barbados relied on keeping a high mortality rate and low standard of living to retain their power over Barbadian labor. Rather than improve colonial relations, British efforts to reform public health in Barbados did little more than unleash a series of conflicts that undermined the faith of West Indian subjects in imperial trusteeship.

Second, the concentrated efforts of the Barbadian upper classes to resist all reform efforts reveal the extent of elite power in the colony. When officials in London urged the Barbadian state to centralize medical services, the upper classes that controlled the government used their sense of identity as being “very English”, or members of a “Little England,” as a rhetorical tactic to justify their resistance both to British oversight as well as to health reform. This paradoxical refusal to take British orders because Barbadians were “English” was the language that local elites used to defend their power. By exploiting the British government’s reluctance to get involved in colonial conflicts, Barbadian elites made implementing reforms as difficult as possible and defied British attempts to enact change in the colony. The legislature’s resistance undermined imperial efforts to regain the loyalty of Britain’s black subjects and, by maintaining the vestry system intact, reinforced local elite power over every aspect of the lives of poor black Barbadians. Nevertheless, the suspicion and anxiety that marked Barbadian elite rhetoric illustrates upper-class anxieties about the tumult of the interwar period and growing labor unrest. As the legislature’s efforts to block health reform and its indifference to devastating epidemics laid bare the horrific reality that its power rested on keeping the Barbadian masses destitute, miserable, and sick, the resulting public outcry and criticism at their handling of health policy

underscored the fractures that marked local rule. Though Barbadian elites prevailed in preventing health reform, the cracks that these conflicts exposed were permanent.

Third, the conflicts between British governor Robertson and the Barbadian legislature over health reform also demonstrate the limitations of imperial power. Due the policy of colonial self-sufficiency and the unique Barbados constitution, the Colonial Office could only pressure the Barbados government, not enforce policy. The structure of the Barbadian colonial state was particularly problematic for British administrators. Colonial states in general were “incomplete and undeveloped,” and required “a complex of shifting alliances with local rulers.” Because of this, colonialism was a process “of adjustment to conditions it could not dictate.”<sup>71</sup> British negotiation with local elites was common throughout the empire, yet in Barbados, the “local rulers” were not indigenous populations, but white creoles who claimed for themselves an exceptional “English” identity. Governors of Barbados, then, faced unique challenges as the planters and merchants who controlled the legislature and vestries used claims of Englishness to refuse British orders. The inability of Governor Robertson to persuade white Barbadians to adopt health reform shows a local manifestation of the wider problems with British power overseas.

Lastly, Britain’s reluctance to intervene on behalf of distressed Barbadian subjects demonstrates the contradictory aims of British colonialism following the war. While the imperial government wished to preserve its position in the Western Hemisphere and prove to the world that it was the best trustee of colonized peoples, it also wanted to keep its role indirect and avoid expending human and economic resources. Additionally, while the British government wanted to regain the loyalty of its black subjects and prevent revolution and unrest, colonial officials also desired to preserve white elite power. These aims were ultimately incompatible. The indecision and indifference that marked British development efforts in Barbados reveals the conflicted

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<sup>71</sup> Anne Phillips, *The Enigma of Colonialism: British Policy in West Africa* (London: James Currey, 1989), 11.

nature of interwar colonialism, as imperial officials and their representatives disagreed over the purpose of the colonial mission and the responsibility of the imperial government to its subjects. By the early 1930s, the fissures exposed by failed public health policies in Barbados made the uncertainty of British rule even more apparent.

## Chapter Five

### Warning from the West Indies

#### Introduction

The struggle over public health reform in Barbados laid bare the ambivalence of British trusteeship, as post-war claims to imperial responsibility clashed with the longstanding official belief in colonial self-sufficiency. The Colonial Office was both unable and unwilling to make the political and fiscal commitment necessary to truly alleviate the miserable health conditions in Barbados. Rather than resolve these tensions, the Colonial Office adopted a policy of retrenchment, withdrawing from trying to intervene in Barbadian affairs any further. This attitude was reinforced as Europe faced an unprecedented economic crisis. When the Great Depression began in late 1929, the already struggling British economy suffered as global trade and industrial output plummeted and unemployment and poverty throughout Britain skyrocketed.<sup>1</sup> The severity of the economic crisis meant that the British government became even less willing to expend already scarce monetary resources in nebulous ideas of colonial development, and official attention turned inwards to deal with domestic affairs.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, as hard as the Great Depression years were on the metropole, the effects of the economic crisis were even more shattering for British colonial subjects. The Caribbean, in

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<sup>1</sup> H. W. Richardson, "The Economic Significance of the Depression in Britain," *Journal of Contemporary History* 4:4 (1970): 3-19; Stephen Constantine, *Unemployment in Britain Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Constantine, *The Making of British Colonial Development Policy*, 93.

particular, suffered as sugar prices fell and the price of imports increased, putting further strain on already economically desperate West Indian populations.<sup>3</sup> Both the United States and the wider circum-Caribbean implemented immigration restrictions in the early 1920s, devastating West Indians who relied on emigration and remittances from abroad to survive.<sup>4</sup> During this period of great economic and social need in the Caribbean, concerns with colonial welfare lost priority. The few development initiatives pursued by the Colonial Office were only adopted if they were expected to alleviate unemployment in Britain. The post-World War I emphasis on trusteeship had fallen to the wayside, as the Colonial Office instead followed a policy of inaction. During the first part of the 1930s, colonial issues were relegated to the background of British policy as the government remained absorbed with domestic problems as well as with increasing diplomatic tensions in Europe.<sup>5</sup> In the mid-1930s, strikes in African and Caribbean colonies prompted the Colonial Office to make inquiries into colonial health and welfare. Yet, while colonial officials expressed statements regarding what Lenore Manderson calls “the moral obligations of the colonial state,” little action backed these new imperatives.<sup>6</sup> The ambivalence of British trusteeship increasingly created space for anti-imperial criticism as reality did not match up to its promises.<sup>7</sup>

In Barbados, continued neglect had major consequences. Barbadian economic problems predated the Great Depression itself. By 1928, the sugar industry was on the verge of collapse, and a rushed Royal Commission to inquire into the causes of the crisis revealed a colony on the verge of insolvency. As the global economic situation worsened, Barbadian social conditions

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<sup>3</sup> Ashton and Stockwell, *Imperial Policy and Colonial Practice*, lxvi.

<sup>4</sup> Lara Putnam, “Race, Nation, and Empire in the Immigration Restrictions of the 1920s in North America and the Greater Caribbean,” in *Workers Across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History*, ed. Leon Fink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 267-293.

<sup>5</sup> Morgan, *The Official History of Colonial Development*, 1-13.

<sup>6</sup> Manderson, *Sickness and the State*, 240.

<sup>7</sup> Owen, “Critics of Empire in Britain,” 194-195.

deteriorated as the health problems that had received so much attention in the 1920s continued. The numerous commissions, which had amassed a wealth of expert knowledge as an attempt to shore up British colonial power, were instead leading to its dismantling.<sup>8</sup> In Barbados, the Public Health Commission had produced new information and spread awareness of the problems with health conditions on the island, yet the local government's subsequent inaction undermined the legitimacy of the House of Assembly. Furthermore, the fact that the British government did nothing to improve health conditions led to widespread dissatisfaction with imperial rule on the part of working- and middle-class Barbadians. As black Barbadians began to increase their demands for political representation and social services, the problems for British colonial rule in the Caribbean mounted.

Increasing awareness of Britain's broken promises to care for its colonial populations coincided with shifting political conditions in Barbados. Beginning in 1930, growing numbers of black politicians sought and gained seats in the House of Assembly. It was the beginning of the end for white political power. While the effects of these slow changes were hard to detect at first, the continued effect of the depression, bleak social conditions, increasing unrest in the wider Caribbean, and the spread of transnational radical thought began to be felt in the island. When Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935 and Britain stood by, it signaled to the people of Barbados as well as to black colonial subjects throughout the empire that the British government would never intervene on behalf of African-descended peoples. Pan-African critiques of empire, which the British government had fought to suppress following the First World War, now found renewed energy in the midst of international economic and political crises. The struggles of the 1930s would deepen and eventually expose the implications of Britain's long policy of imperial neglect in the West Indies.

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<sup>8</sup> Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory*, 323.



## British attitudes towards colonial welfare in 1929

By the end of the 1920s, even though the Colonial Office had backed away from urging further reform in Barbados, the British government was in the midst of passing new development legislation for the empire. In 1929, in an attempt to urge the colonies to purchase domestic materials to stimulate the British economy, the British government passed the Colonial Development Act (CDA). The CDA set up a Colonial Development Fund (CDF) in London, which received proposals from the colonies both to fund infrastructure projects and provide social services. The CDF did not make available free assistance to colonies, but rather provided loans that colonial governments were then obliged to repay. The new act reflected the old view on colonial development that had prevailed since the late nineteenth century: if the British government became involved in developing colonial resources, it would only do so if this action benefitted the metropole.<sup>9</sup>

The CDA indicated that the purpose of colonial development at the dawn of the depression was not due to concern for the welfare of colonial subjects, but instead to relieve economic pressures in the metropole. As one colonial official, Kenneth Blackburne, recalled about the CDF, “no need was seen to assist the colonial development in the interests of the colonial peoples themselves; the Act was in fact primarily designed to alleviate unemployment at home.”<sup>10</sup> The fact that relieving British unemployment was the basis of the 1929 Act points to why the British government had retreated so hastily from health reform in Barbados. Development initiatives could not cost anything to the British state, and policies of colonial welfare could only go forward if funded by the individual colony.

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<sup>9</sup> Constantine, *The Making of British Colonial Development Policy*, 164-191.

<sup>10</sup> Blackburne, *Lasting Legacy*, 49.

The effects of the CDA were disappointing to metropolitan officials, who hoped that colonial governments would use the fund to spearhead lavish development projects that would utilize British resources and stimulate colonial exports. Instead, reluctant to take on onerous loans, colonial governments did not apply for the amount of funding for development programs anticipated by the British state.<sup>11</sup> This was the case for the entire colonial empire, but in particular for the already overburdened West Indies. In March 1930, S.H. Wilson at the Colonial Office wrote to the West Indian governors, experiencing frustration that the colonies were not making full use of the fund. Wilson wrote that he understood how West Indian governments felt they could not bear the burden of interest payments and repayment at the end of the loan period. However, he attempted to reason with the governors and push, in particular, projects that worked towards health development schemes. Wilson stressed that the CDF Committee was prepared “to give liberal assistance towards schemes of public health and research, which are not the less important because they involve a smaller outlay.” In particular, he noted that the “economic importance” of health measures is appreciated in Britain, and that grants had been given towards drainage, water supply, and hospitals. All of these schemes, he noted, would contribute to the economic development of the empire.<sup>12</sup> As it had in the past, the Colonial Office would still use health reforms to pacify West Indian populations, but only if Caribbean governments agreed to bear the expense.

Barbados provides an example of the reluctance of colonial governments to utilize the new development act. The Barbados government submitted three modest proposals, but refused to submit any more. Like other colonies around the empire, the Barbadian government could not afford to take out loans to pay for expensive infrastructure projects. Additionally, Barbadian

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<sup>11</sup> Constantine, *The Making of British Colonial Development Policy*, 201-204.

<sup>12</sup> TNA, CO 318/399/5, S.H. Wilson to Governors of the West Indies, March 21, 1930.

elites were as hesitant as always to accept outside interference, and seemed offended with the idea that Barbados needed help in the first place. As S.C. Thorne scoffed during the Assembly debates on the legislation, development schemes were only needed for colonies like Kenya, not Barbados.<sup>13</sup> Proud white Barbadian elites viewed themselves as true Englishmen presiding over an established English government in the Caribbean, and therefore superior to African colonies acquired in the late-nineteenth century. Yet, the limited effect of the CDF in Barbados was also connected to the apprehensions of the British government.

The Lords Commissioners of the Treasury, who approved development loans, saw the island as a shaky investment in a time of great economic uncertainty. Of the three proposals that Barbados sent, the Treasury approved only the least expensive schemes. The most costly proposal, to improve the water supply of the island, was rejected, even though it was the project that would most significantly benefit and “develop” the island. This rejection was related to the conflicts that had characterized the public health disputes of the 1920s. The Treasury found the decentralized vestry system of the island to be inefficient, and declared that a colony must prove that it used its resources responsibly. Thus, the Treasury would not authorize CDF funds “so long as the system of parochial Boards, which is characterised as ‘wasteful’, continues.”<sup>14</sup> The failure of reform thus came both from elite Barbadian reluctance to spend money on development projects as well as the British government’s indifference to colonial welfare that did not directly benefit Britain by alleviating unemployment in the metropole.

### **Lord Olivier’s commission**

The other reason the Barbadian government was reluctant to utilize the CDF for development schemes was because of crisis in the West Indian sugar industry, caused by the

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<sup>13</sup> BDA, House of Assembly debates, October 8, 1929, 524.

<sup>14</sup> BDA, GH 3/7/16, “Colonial Development Fund,” February 11, 1931.

availability of inexpensive sugar from U.S. client states like Cuba and falling prices on the oversupplied world sugar market. The industry had been in depression since 1928, and both debt and unemployment skyrocketed throughout the region even before the onset of the Great Depression. Sugar prices fell dramatically from US\$73.20 a ton in 1927 to \$41.52 in 1931.<sup>15</sup> The situation for Barbados was particularly dire, since the island depended so heavily on sugar for its economic wellbeing. In contrast to Jamaica and Trinidad where sugar accounted for 20 percent of total exports, in Barbados sugar comprised a staggering 95 percent of the island's exports.<sup>16</sup> Continued decline in the sugar industry increased the burden of the poor on public resources and intensified the misery of the laboring classes. Additionally, if the British government lifted its preference on West Indian sugar, the Barbadian state would be in such debt that it would no longer be able to operate independently.<sup>17</sup> If the Barbadian economy collapsed, the British government would be forced to take financial responsibility for the colony's affairs.

In 1929, as a response to the West Indian sugar crisis, the newly-elected Labour government in Britain sent a royal commission to investigate how to resuscitate the ailing industry. This was the first official British inquiry to investigate the West Indian sugar industry since the 1897 West India Royal Commission, whose recommendations to develop peasant smallholdings had been adopted only sporadically.<sup>18</sup> During the earlier depression of the late-nineteenth century, plantation laborers had starved in Barbados due to low wages and high food prices. Indeed, when leaving Barbados in 1897, commissioner Sir Edward Grey remarked "One of these days Barbados will blow up."<sup>19</sup> When the 1929 commission, headed by the Fabian

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<sup>15</sup> Robert L. Morris, "The Effects of the Great Depression," in *Emancipation III*, 42.

<sup>16</sup> TNA, CAB 24/209, Report of the Sugar Commission, February 1930, 39.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-70.

<sup>18</sup> Bonham C. Richardson, "Depression, Riots and the Calling of the 1897 Royal Commission," *New West Indian Guide* 66:3/4 (1992), 169-191.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Sydney Olivier, "The Scandal of West Indian Labour Conditions," *The Contemporary Review*, January 1, 1938, 284.

socialist Lord Sydney Olivier, visited most of the West Indian colonies, the commissioners found that many of the same problems with low wages and high food prices uncovered by the 1897 investigation still remained and, in some cases, had even worsened.

During the course of their travels throughout the Caribbean, Olivier and other British officials heard testimony from government officials, planters, and laborers regarding the economy, wages, and costs of running sugar plantations. The commission arrived in Barbados in October of 1929. Olivier and the other commissioners found that the sugar industry struggled because it used outmoded and inefficient modes of production, received paltry sums for sugar yields, and remained subject to the whims of drought, market values, and competition from American sugar producers. The planters who testified before the commission complained about the prices they received for their crops, and argued that they paid Barbadian laborers the maximum wage possible. If employers increased wages, according to the planters, the sugar industry would go bankrupt.

A deputation of laborers that testified before the commission painted a different picture of plantation work. Representatives from the WMA argued that wages for laborers were almost half of what planters had testified before the commission, and presented had numerous letters from laborers “in their own handwriting” stating that the wages were very low. The WMA also told the commissioners about the draconian Masters and Servants laws that tied laborers to their plantations through contracts, making it difficult for desperate workers to move to another estate in search of employment.<sup>20</sup> At WMA meetings after the commission’s departure, organizers like Louis Sebro expressed confidence that Lord Olivier would help, since he had seen how badly Barbadian workers were treated. According to Sebro, “The government of England will give a

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<sup>20</sup> BDA, Pam 136 A, Proceedings of the West Indian Sugar Commission, Fourth Public Session, October 22, 1929, 59.

million dollars to be divided among the Colonies in the West Indies for improvement of conditions.”<sup>21</sup>

According to Clennell Wickham in the *Herald*, this testimony reflected the faith held by many Barbadian laborers that the British government would bring them higher wages because the Labour Party was now in power. Indeed, at both UNIA and WMA meetings in late 1929, numerous speakers proclaimed that the Labour government would send help to look after the interests of the working classes. As one activist claimed, the sugar commission understood “the pangs of suffering” and would surely urge the British government to aid Barbadian workers.<sup>22</sup> While Wickham was himself a socialist, he scoffed at how the Barbadian poor looked “toward the Socialist Government from whence they expect their salvation.” Wickham believed that the new administration had little more interest in colonial welfare than the conservative government it had replaced.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, in February 1930 when the commission published its final report, it appeared more concerned with saving the reputation of the British Empire as colonial trustee than actually alleviating West Indian suffering. Olivier’s report framed the recommendations in terms of imperial responsibility that reflected the language of trusteeship popular during the interwar period. The report urged the British government to intervene in order to save West Indian sugar plantations, and recommended increasing the sugar preference to ensure that the industry survived. If the sugar plantations failed, Lord Olivier wrote, already poor health conditions in the Caribbean would worsen and the social conditions of the laborers would further deteriorate. The suffering of black West Indian workers would severely undercut Britain’s imperial mission. Additionally, the report reflected continued official fears of U.S. competition in the Caribbean as

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<sup>21</sup> BDA, GH 4/38, Detective Brathwaite to Detective Inspector, January 10, 1930.

<sup>22</sup> BDA, GH 4/37b, Detective Brathwaite’s report of WMA Meeting on October 6, 1929.

<sup>23</sup> Clennell Wickham, “People and Things,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, October 19, 1929, 4.

sugar from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Haiti vied with West Indian output. Olivier warned that not only would this lead to U.S. predominance in the sugar industry, but it also threatened to shift the loyalty and “political affections” of West Indians to the United States.<sup>24</sup> This could not happen, as Britain had a “special obligation to the negro populations of the West Indies and British Guiana.”<sup>25</sup> The report shows how British officials saw the role of the Caribbean within the empire, as black West Indian loyalty shored up Britain’s legitimacy as an imperial trustee.

Another incident in 1930 sheds further light on why the British government continued to value the economically stagnant West Indies. Soon after the publication of the Commission’s report, Charles Orr, the governor of the Bahamas, wrote to J.H. Thomas at the Colonial Office urging that Canada be allowed to take over the island chain to help relieve the Colonial Office of responsibility for “the management of the numerous scattered units, large and small” of the empire.<sup>26</sup> Colonial officials did not respond favorably to these suggestions, viewing it as a blow to the mission of the British Empire. One memo claimed that ceding the Bahamas would expose the British government “to the accusation that they were unable or unwilling to continue to execute that trust, the creditable discharge of which has been the achievement of successive British Governments.” Additionally, Canada did not display “any particular aptitude for dealing with a coloured population.”<sup>27</sup> Gilbert Grindle agreed, writing that “We have a special responsibility for the black population of the West Indies, and I, for one, believe we should fail grievously in our duty if we handed them over to be exploited as a pawn in Canadian politics.”<sup>28</sup> The Caribbean might not have been economically important for the struggling British Empire,

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<sup>24</sup> TNA, CAB 24/209, Report of the Sugar Commission, February 1930, 29.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>26</sup> TNA, CO 318/401/7, Charles Orr to J.H. Thomas, June 26, 1930.

<sup>27</sup> TNA, CO 318/401/7, Colonial Office memorandum, July 15, 1930.

<sup>28</sup> TNA, CO 318/401/7, Minute by Gilbert Grindle, July 15, 1930.

but it was key to the ideological claim that the British were better equipped to manage black populations, both in the Caribbean and in Africa, than anyone else.

Despite these lofty claims of caring for black subjects, the British government initially refused to increase the preference recommended by the Sugar Commission's report. Britain's own economic problems distracted from imperial issues, and the already overstretched British treasury was unwilling to bail out struggling colonies while domestic unemployment continued to climb. It was only after two years of continued lobbying that the British government eventually increased the preference. Even then it was not enough to revive the industry or improve Barbadian wages and social conditions, and while the British treasury stalled, conditions in Barbados deteriorated further. Nine months after the Sugar Commission's report, the Director of Agriculture for Barbados, R.W.R. Miller, submitted his own report on the condition of the sugar industry to the Colonial Office. Miller's account was bleak, as the industry remained stagnant. Agricultural laborers, he wrote, were "on the border line of starvation."<sup>29</sup> When Lord Olivier returned to the region three months later, he found that conditions had worsened even further. Barbados, Antigua, and St. Kitts were affected by a severe drought that caused "great impoverishment." In Barbados, wages had been reduced by 15-25 percent since the Commission left the island. If wages in 1930 "barely provided sufficient maintenance for labourers and their families," now workers were "enduring extreme penury, for the profit of British sugar consumers." He painted a picture of high unemployment, severe overcrowding and overpopulation, and a high death rate from malnutrition.<sup>30</sup>

The economic problems only worsened as the Great Depression continued. After 1929 trade from the United States was reduced, merchants increased the prices of staple imports like

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<sup>29</sup> TNA, CO 318/401/9, R.W.R. Miller, Report on the General State of the Sugar Industry in Barbados, October 9, 1930.

<sup>30</sup> TNA, CO 318/402/9, Lord Olivier to Passfield, January 5, 1931.



corn meal, flour, and oil. This higher cost of living further taxed the resources of estate laborers whose wage rates remained depressed. Additionally, the population of the island swelled as traditional locales for Barbadian emigrants closed. Between 1921 and 1938, as many as 43,000 laborers migrated back to Barbados, who often could not find work upon their return.<sup>31</sup> Yet the Colonial Office remained as reluctant as ever to get involved in colonial problems, and were further restrained by a Treasury that would block any significant expenditure on colonial affairs. The British Empire thus pursued its policy of “trusteeship” in name only, leaving the West Indies to struggle alone.

### **Health in the 1930s**

The effects of Britain’s official policy of colonial self-sufficiency would be meted out on the bodies of Barbadian workers. Since the Barbados legislature had succeeded in resisting the reforms of the Public Health Commission, conditions only further deteriorated during the Depression. The consequences of official neglect and poverty became clear when the Sugar Commission heard testimony regarding health conditions on the island. During the course of his testimony before the commission, Dr. John Hutson testified that since 1921, 32.7 percent of the entire population was on some sort of relief, either by Poor Law authorities or the General Hospital.<sup>32</sup> In Barbados, public expenditure on relief was meager and available to only the most desperately poor individuals. According to Hutson, about 32 percent of the population was “on the margin of destitution” and warned that “a severe retrenchment in the means of their livelihood would tend to put at least that 32 percent out of existence.”<sup>33</sup> The fact that nearly one-

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<sup>31</sup> L. Morris, “The Effects of the Great Depression,” 49-51.

<sup>32</sup> BDA, Pam 136 A, Proceedings of the West Indian Sugar Commission, Fourth Public Session, October 22, 1929, 51.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 52.

third of the island's population would perish if economic conditions worsened showed the neglected and tenuous position of the Barbadian poor.

Olivier found Hutson's testimony compelling, and brought up "the enormous high death rate" in the colony. In particular, he was concerned that half of all deaths in 1928 occurred amongst children under three years of age. Hutson explained that the leading cause of death for infants was diarrhea, a preventable illness related to malnutrition.<sup>34</sup> The testimony of a local shopkeeper, Alfred Goring, shed further light upon the high infant mortality rate. Infants were malnourished, Goring stated, because laborers were unable to afford milk for their infants. Instead, poor Barbadian mothers mixed flour with tea and called it milk. This comprised the diet of many infants, since most laboring women had to go back to work shortly after birth and could not breastfeed their children.

Goring's portrait of the living conditions endured by many poor mothers and children was appalling. Goring described the crowded and neglected dwellings of his neighbors, who resided "in rooms 6 feet square or 6 feet by 8 feet and occupied by four or five of them." Furthermore, he observed, many poor women could not afford childcare for their children. Working Barbadian mothers ultimately faced the choice of returning to work and leaving their children behind, or staying home to starve. The babies left behind would "lie in their own mess right through to their swaddling-bands." Numerous children would "lie in the rooms and scream and struggle and die. Nobody is left behind to care them."<sup>35</sup> The fact that so many Barbadian infants died a slow, painful death through malnutrition and neglect made for horrifying testimony.

As had been the case since emancipation, however, Barbadian elites denied complicity in an economic system that provided inadequate wages for a family to survive. Instead, the planter

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>35</sup> BDA, Pam 136 A, Proceedings of the West Indian Sugar Commission, additional testimony, 97-99.

class placed blame for the problem on the immorality, selfishness, and neglect of black mothers. Dr. Hawkins, who had notoriously espoused his eugenicist views in the 1927 Public Health Commission report, also testified before the Sugar Commission about the infant death rate. He agreed that most deaths occurred amongst the poor population of the island, yet, he did not blame the economic hardships of these families for the high mortality rates. Instead, in a refrain common to white local elites, Hawkins pointed to the deficient morality of single mothers. A poor, single black mother, he argued, was “more inclined to let the child go to the wall than allow herself to go to the wall. There is not that maternal instinct, on the part of that class of mother, for preserving the child as there is with the woman in a regular home”.<sup>36</sup> In making these claims, Hawkins espoused a similar view to both British officials and colonial elites across the empire. Poor women were viewed as “ignorant and indifferent mothers” who bore the primary responsibility for “sickly infants and high rates of infant mortality.”<sup>37</sup> Rather than inequality and poverty, Hawkins too blamed the moral inadequacies of working-class women for the high infant mortality rate.

The tone of elite discourse in Barbados about infant mortality also comprised a much darker element than popularly expressed in other parts of the empire. As he had done in his Minority Report to the 1927 Public Health Commission report, Hawkins once again argued that the death of so many children was actually beneficial for the colony. This time, he repeated his claims confidently, and publicly, before a British commissioner. As Hawkins reasoned, “Unless we can have this very high infant mortality we would have a greater population than the island could support... If you do not have this high infantile mortality the island would be over

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<sup>36</sup> BDA, Pam 136 A, Proceedings of the West Indian Sugar Commission, Fourth Public Session, October 22, 1929, 54.

<sup>37</sup> de Barros, *Reproducing the British Caribbean*, 95.

populated and would be poorer than it is at present.”<sup>38</sup> The Darwinian argument that infant death was necessary to control the population horrified Sydney Olivier, who maintained liberal, paternalist views towards black West Indians. Laughing and incredulous, Olivier retorted, “As a substitution for emigration, you have a high infantile mortality?”<sup>39</sup> But Hawkins was unabashed in his defense of this viewpoint. Poor infants needed to perish, he argued. “Like animals, there is nowhere to pasture them and you may as well let them die when they come.”<sup>40</sup> Again, the views of white Barbadian elites demonstrated not only their lack of empathy for the struggles of poor black workers, but their advocacy of a system that destroyed black lives without mercy.

At the same time, the testimony was also working to spread awareness of the problems of elite rule amongst Barbadian workers. WMA and UNIA members, who followed the Commission proceedings closely, pointed to Hawkins’s testimony as evidence of white elite cruelty and indifference to black suffering in the colony. At one UNIA meeting, activists lambasted the doctor’s statements as proof that white elites would never give up their power in the island. Melville Inniss, a railway porter, accused Hawkins of trying to “reduce” the black race through high infant mortality, and said he was like the pharaoh in Exodus who ordered infants to be executed. Whites, Inniss argued, were fighting to “preserve their race” and black Barbadians should do the same as “sons of Ethiopia.” Alexandra Gibbs, a prominent female UNIA member, argued that black Barbadians should go to Africa because the testimony of Hawkins showed that black subjects were unwanted in the colony. Yet, while these activists criticized the cold statements of Hawkins and used them as a rallying cry for racial unity, Barbadian radicals still seemed to believe in the principle of British trusteeship. Several members

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<sup>38</sup> BDA, Pam 136 A, Proceedings of the West Indian Sugar Commission, Fourth Public Session, October 22, 1929, 54.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 56.

discussed their desire to approach the Colonial Office and the Prime Minister directly to make their claims for reform, confident that the British government would intervene if only it understood the extent of black suffering in the colony.<sup>41</sup>

The faith of Barbadian radicals in British oversight was misplaced. While the affect of the sugar depression on West Indian health was a central part of Olivier's report to the Colonial Office, the British government did little to address the problem in Barbados while elites remained opposed to reforming health services.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, elites remained staunchly opposed to enacting measures that would benefit the welfare of the poor. The issue of health reform and the fallout from the 1927 recommendations remained heated even after the British government retreated from pressing for reform. In December 1930, during a lengthy debate, Barbadian Assembly members questioned whether the colony should retain a Chief Medical Officer. Members of the government continued to deflect responsibility for medical reform onto the British state. Even a progressive black Assembly member, Erskine Ward, blamed the Colonial Office, who "resolutely refused to find such a man" that would meet the restrictive requirements set by the Assembly.<sup>43</sup> H.W. Reece went further and stated that having a CMO was no longer necessary at all, since malaria was "a thing of the past."<sup>44</sup> As always, the Barbadian government only allowed reform in the case of a major epidemic, and then retreated back into complacency.

In 1931, the Colonial Office finally located a physician willing to go to Barbados under the onerous restrictions placed upon the CMO position by the Barbadian legislature. Dr. E.A. Seagar, the new Chief Medical Officer, came to the island to encounter a dysfunctional health administration over which he had no executive authority. Seagar's power was feeble, as his

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<sup>41</sup> BDA, GH 4/37b, Detective Brathwaite's report of UNIA Meeting on October 29, 1929.

<sup>42</sup> TNA, CO 28/309/12, Despatch from W.C.F. Robertson to the Colonial Office, May 9, 1930.

<sup>43</sup> BDA, House of Assembly debates, December 16, 1930, 549-550.

<sup>44</sup> BDA, House of Assembly debates, December 16, 1930, 550.

reports and advice could “be entirely ignored” and it was “extremely rare” for them to have an effect.<sup>45</sup> The fragmented vestry system in the island was particularly formidable in blocking change. The doctor complained that he had a “total lack of executive power or influence” over the vestry health commissioners, rendering him helpless against “the complete conservatism and independence of the separate localities which compose the polity of the Island.”<sup>46</sup> Clearly, nothing about the Barbadian public health system had really changed. His report could have been written in 1925, before reform efforts had even begun. Within a few months, he resigned in frustration.

Seagar’s final report revealed how the struggling sugar industry and high food prices had affected the health of poor Barbadians during the Depression. Most Barbadian laborers, he reported, continued to live in appalling conditions. In particular, housing and sanitation in the crowded tenements of Bridgetown were “primitive and antiquated.” These tenancies had sprung up around the capital in recent years as a result of unemployed sugar laborers flocking to town, and the rapid influx of workers from the countryside resulted in overcrowded and shoddy dwellings. Disease spread rapidly under these circumstances, in particular since few workers were vaccinated against smallpox and typhoid. Additionally, the food supply was contaminated, with an unregulated dairy industry that did not take adequate measures to prevent the spread of foodborne illness. The hookworm problem also remained severe. Yet, while he wished to re-invite the Rockefeller Foundation to treat this epidemic, he realized that since “public health matters are so involved in lay parochial politics and economics, and that there is such a complete lack of reciprocity and co-ordination amongst the separate localities,” any attempt to invite the Foundation “would not only prove barren, but also ultimately hopelessly embarrassing.” The

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<sup>45</sup> TNA, CO 28/311/13, Report on Medical and Sanitary Administration in Barbados by Dr. E.A. Seagar, 1932.

<sup>46</sup> TNA, CO 28/311/13, Seagar to Owen, Col Secretary, May 6, 1932.

effects of the inefficient health and sanitary administration were taking a drastic toll on the wellbeing of Barbadian laborers. In what would become prophetic words, he concluded by stating he did not believe that “the present system of local government could go on without modification much longer.”<sup>47</sup>

Seagar realized that the state of health and poverty in the colony was unsustainable, and would eventually lead to political crisis. Yet despite his warning the Colonial Office continued its laissez-faire approach to colonial problems.<sup>48</sup> In response to Seagar’s report, West Indies Department officials expressed the benign hope that the next CMO would have more success. According to the clerks in London, meaningful change would only occur through persuasion. This tactic, they believed, was much less expensive and politically risky than direct intervention. The responsibility for health reform in the colony, then, laid entirely with the CMO, whose efforts should be “missionary in nature and persuade the Barbadians to do something in sanitation.”<sup>49</sup> Yet Seagar had been remarkably successful compared to other medical officers before him. After Seagar left, Governor Robertson wrote that his resignation had caused widespread disappointment. The doctor had had actually been able to persuade local authorities to adopt some of his suggestions, even though he had little personal power.<sup>50</sup> The fact that Seagar still resigned in frustration and distress after making headway points to the inefficacy of expecting a medical officer to enact real change through the force of his personality alone.

The next CMO, Dr. John Haslam, also expressed his frustration with a position that was “no more than an unrelated, inspecting government official.” Yet, despite his lack of administrative power to direct medical policy, prominent Barbadian planters and merchants

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<sup>47</sup> CO 28/311/13, Report on Medical and Sanitary Administration in Barbados by Dr. E.A. Seagar, 1932.

<sup>48</sup> BDA, *Annual Colonial Report*, 1931-1932, 7.

<sup>49</sup> TNA, CO 28/311/16, Minute by Roinein, November 22, 1932.

<sup>50</sup> TNA, CO 28/311/15, Robertson to Cunliffe-Lister, September 20, 1932.

portrayed his presence as proof of “the thin end of the wedge of Crown Colony Government.” Barbadian elites continued to use this extreme logic to resist expanding the powers of the office and resist any reforms that Haslam might suggest. Despite governmental constraints, however, Haslam found that many local medical practitioners in the island were dedicated to helping the sick and needy. He reported that local physicians and inspectors “have personally given me every support and assistance” despite the incredible difficulty of coordinating health work in a decentralized and underfunded system.<sup>51</sup> The refusal of Barbadian elites to allow health reform was clearly not the view of all Barbadians, and local health workers did what they could to prevent epidemics and reduce the suffering of poor Barbadians who lacked access to a healthy diet and basic sanitation.

Haslam focused on the problem of infant mortality during his tenure as CMO, as it remained one of the most tragic effects of poverty, inequality, and official neglect in Barbados. Yet, white Barbadian elites continued to espouse heartless theories of population control when Haslam made proposals for reform, such as instituting a maternal and infant welfare organization. In a dispatch to the Colonial Office, Haslam stated that “in Barbados one is very frequently confronted by the statement, even from responsible public men, that there are too many people in the Island already and that therefore efforts at saving child life are undesirable.” While individuals like Dr. Hawkins voiced such claims boldly, most statements in support of eugenics occurred in private. According to Haslam, many white elites who held this view would not “publicly support a policy of letting the children die as a means of handling the problem.”<sup>52</sup> The acceptance of an informal eugenics policy made meaningful administrative change impossible.

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<sup>51</sup> BDA, SRL 12, Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 1933-34, 2-3.

<sup>52</sup> BDA, SRL 12, Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 1933-34, 6.



Haslam's reflections on the state of almshouses and of the island's General Hospital are also revealing of how Barbadian officials saw public health administration in the 1930s. The General Hospital, he explained, was supposed to service the entire island, but it contained only 170 beds and was severely understaffed. The lack of space created a dilemma for sick Barbadians. When the hospital was full, which happened regularly, patients were forced to go to parish almshouses. Yet, the almshouses were legally bound to "refuse any aid to any who are not considered to be real paupers, and this restriction denies the benefits of the poor relief Acts to many who are poor indeed."<sup>53</sup> This loophole meant that many ill, poor Barbadians had no access to health care. This had dramatic economic consequences for a population that was on the brink of destitution. As Haslam explained, "The level of subsistence of the labouring and even of the artisan classes is such, however, that sickness quickly means de facto if not de jure pauperism, and it is impossible to draw any effective line between the two. To my mind... one must think of the whole of the labouring and artisan class as one." For the poor who did not necessarily qualify for pauper status, getting sick even once could easily push them into this category. Haslam, for his part, thought it ridiculous that the almshouses were for "paupers" while the hospital was for the "poor sick" when the line between the two was so vague and arbitrary.<sup>54</sup>

As the Colonial Office received these devastating reports, officials fretted about health conditions in Barbados. In a dispatch to the new Governor of Barbados, Mark Young, Henry Beckett, the head of the West Indies Department, wrote that "little real progress will be made until the administration of public health is taken away from the parochial boards and vested in a central authority." This would be the only action that would allow "a comprehensive and modern public health act" to be introduced. The British government had retained its faith in

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<sup>53</sup> BDA, SRL 12, Appendix VII, "A Report on the Hospital Services of Barbados," in Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 1933-34, 41-43

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 41-43

modernization, centralization, and expert direction that characterized interwar colonial knowledge. Yet, the correspondence urging reform remained private between Beckett and the governor. The Colonial Office had no plans to send an official dispatch as Devonshire had done in 1923, for fear that it would cause too much backlash against the British government by the Barbadian legislature. Instead, Beckett expressed the prevailing and naive hope for “a change in public opinion” in Barbados that would spur the Barbados government to pass new legislation on its own at some time in the future.<sup>55</sup> Without public Colonial Office backing, the most that Governor Young could do was place more pressure on John Haslam to convince Barbadian officials to enact reforms piece by piece.<sup>56</sup>

Frustrated, Haslam privately expressed his opinion to the Colonial Secretary that such efforts were useless. Again and again, the Barbadian government rejected measures to alter health administration in the colony. In 1934, for example, Haslam proposed adding a general supervisory duty to the functions of the Chief Medical Officer. The House of Assembly once again struck down an attempt to allow the CMO to direct government medical officers. To Haslam, these efforts seemed futile before the obstinate legislature.<sup>57</sup> No amount of persuasion would change the “traditional principle of social organisation in Barbados, namely, that all responsibility for care of the poor whether sick or not shall devolve upon parochial authorities and not upon the central authority.”<sup>58</sup> In March 1935, like Seagar before him, Haslam departed the colony to take a less restrictive position as the Director of Medical Services in Northern Rhodesia. Barbadian health conditions mostly remained the same as before, with an infant

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<sup>55</sup> BDA, GH 4/65, Beckett to Mark Young, January 31, 1934.

<sup>56</sup> BDA, GH 4/65, Haslam to Young, February 23, 1934.

<sup>57</sup> BDA, GH 4/66, Haslam to Owen, June 1, 1934.

<sup>58</sup> BDA, SRL 12, Appendix VII, “A Report on the Hospital Services of Barbados,” in Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 1933-34, 41-43.

mortality rate of 256 per 1,000 amidst a culture of official indifference to sanitation in the colony.<sup>59</sup>

The British medical community had learned of the administrative dysfunction of the colony's health system. A year after Haslam's departure, the CMO post remained vacant. As Governor Young wrote in a heated dispatch to the Colonial Office, "Health administration is in need of radical reform," but it was impossible to do so without a CMO and with a legislature that refused to accept change.<sup>60</sup> However, the Colonial Office was unable to find a new Chief Medical Officer, as the low pay, lack of pension, and restricted age range of the job made the post extremely difficult to fill. In June of 1937, more than two years after the departure of John Haslam, Henry Beckett at the Colonial Office responded to Young's repeated requests about the still-vacant post. Beckett wrote that the CO had advertised the post but received "no satisfactory applications," as the restrictions on the job continued to dissuade people from applying.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the CMO post was not the only medical job in Barbados that stayed vacant due to miserable working conditions and low pay. The *British Medical Journal* completely refused to solicit surgeons to work at the Barbados General Hospital. According to the journal in June 1937, "The salaries offered were considered to be inadequate and the general conditions of service to be poor. The advertisements submitted have therefore been refused."<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile, the poor of Barbados continued to suffer. In 1936, in response to an inquiry made by the League of Nations, the British government requested information from colonial governments about nutrition in individual colonies. The report from Barbados was disturbing. In April 1937, when the Barbadian committee on nutrition concluded its investigation, they drew

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<sup>59</sup> BDA, SRL 12, Report of the Chief Medical Officer 1934-1935, 9-14.

<sup>60</sup> TNA, CO 28/316/7, Mark Young to Ormsby-Gore, June 22, 1936.

<sup>61</sup> BDA, GH 4/108, Beckett to Mark Young, June 30, 1937.

<sup>62</sup> BDA, GH 4/108, Enclosure in despatch, Beckett to Mark Young, June 30, 1937.

bleak conclusions about food accessibility for most Barbadians. The condition of children in particular was troubling. From birth to early childhood, the diet of Barbadian children consisted primarily of carbohydrates. As the report noted, “the vitamin content of the nourishment given is practically ‘nil.’” Additionally, once children were old enough to go to school, they often did not have adequate nutrition to function. Teachers reported that “listlessness and inattention” was due to underfeeding. The weekly wages that most parents made were only adequate to feed a family for four days of the week. Consequently, by Thursdays children often came to school very hungry. This not only affected their health, but also their ability to receive an education.<sup>63</sup>

The Barbadian nutrition committee concluded that the health of Barbadian workers had not improved since the 1920s. According to the committee, “the diet of the average worker can be classed at the best only as a maintenance diet, and that the great shortage of milk, eggs and fresh vegetables cannot be too strongly stressed, and there is no reason to doubt that many households live on the borderland of extreme poverty.”<sup>64</sup> The housing situation reflected this state as well, with 68 percent of the island’s population living in “cottages of less than three rooms” and lacking “sanitary arrangements which can be considered even moderately satisfactory.”<sup>65</sup> The Depression years were taking their toll on Barbadian workers, and the government made only feeble attempts to help. While the Barbadian legislature eventually established an Employment Agency with partial help from the CDF, the agency helped just a small number of Barbadians. From 1934-1938, of the 5,688 Barbadians registered with the agency, only 1,611 found jobs.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Report of the Committee appointed to consider and report on the question of nutrition in Barbados, *Official Gazette*, October 7, 1937, 1.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Annual Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of Barbados, 1934-35 (London: HMSO, 1935), 10.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

These conditions were a direct result of the contradictory, conflicting policies of both the Barbadian and the British states during the 1930s. Barbadian officials who turned a blind eye to social conditions favored personal power over welfare, and some even advocated the high infant mortality rate as a necessity for population control. At the same time, the British government bickered with the governor and placed the blame for miserable social conditions on Barbadian elites alone, paying little more than lip service to the idea of Barbadian trusteeship. While the effects of the Great Depression both in England and in the colonies led to increasing “support for state intervention to alleviate poverty,” the Colonial Office denied responsibility for Barbadian welfare by claiming that their hands were tied.<sup>67</sup> As Barbadian workers descended deeper into economic distress, ate meals only four days a week, and faced the possibility that even one illness could send them over the brink into pauperism, the warning of Dr. Seagar when he left Barbados seemed ever more certain of fulfillment.

### **Electoral changes**

In the midst of the continuing economic and health problem of the 1930s, slow political transformation was unfolding in Barbados. Similar to some rural counties in the U.S. south during the early twentieth century, the economic and legal security of Barbadian planters meant that white elites allowed “a degree of black involvement in the ‘for whites-only’ political process.”<sup>68</sup> The franchise was so limited in Barbados that the few black candidates and voters posed little threat to the existing order, and indeed could further white political power because it appeared that since *some* black Barbadians could vote, others could also achieve this right if they only worked hard enough. At the same time, the economic controls put in place by planters meant that black voters were in a tenuous position should they embrace candidates that went

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<sup>67</sup> Lewis, *Empire State-Building*, 360.

<sup>68</sup> Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy*, 176.

against elite interests. For example, black smallholders who qualified to vote based on property ownership usually borrowed money from factory owners and large estate owners. If it was thought that he did not vote for a planter candidate, the black smallholder would not be able to borrow money, or a sugar factory might not accept his canes.<sup>69</sup>

By the early 1930s, though, the electorate had slowly expanded. Since the establishment of the Democratic League in 1924, the efforts of Charles Duncan O’Neale and other “progressives” to identify, recruit, and rally new voters began to have a real influence at the polls. While in the early 1920s, only two percent of the population was eligible to vote because of income and property restrictions, O’Neale and other League members were instrumental in identifying Barbadians that did not know they could be enfranchised. Between 1921 and 1937 the electorate grew by 186.52 percent, or 4 percent of the population, due to an increase in the number of property owners.<sup>70</sup> Franchise expansion coincided with the many scandals of the 1920s regarding the Public Health Commission, which had weakened the legitimacy of some elites in the Assembly. Members of the black middle class used this public frustration to make an unprecedented push for seats in the legislature. In February of 1930, these efforts were rewarded when voters elected four black attorneys to the House of Assembly. The efforts of so-called Barbadian “progressives” were having a meaningful effect amongst new black voters.

At the same time, members of the WMA and UNIA were making increasing claims for political rights in the colony. At one 1931 WMA meeting, in which 200 attended, speakers decried that a bill to extend the franchise even further had been struck down in the House. According to some members, not only the Barbadian state, but also the British government owed something to Barbadians. “In 1914 we fought for our King and Country, if that is so, why they

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<sup>69</sup> Wynter Crawford *I Speak for the People: The Memoirs of Wynter Crawford*, ed. Woodville K. Marshall (Kingston: Ian Randall, 2003), 68-69.

<sup>70</sup> Hunte, “The Struggle for Political Democracy,” 138.

want to prevent us from having a voice in our Government to say who shall represent us.”<sup>71</sup> The Depression, it seemed, had reprised the grievances and political claims of the post-World War I years. Black candidates capitalized on these political movements to reach potential voters. At another WMA meeting, in which 400 attended, the Assembly member Chrissie Brathwaite campaigned for reelection by urging Barbadian workers to petition the Secretary of State for the Colonies to overrule the House and expand the franchise. In addition to building upon the suspicion held by many Barbadians for local elites, he also drew a link to international anti-colonial movements. “Mr. Gandhi said we are human too, why should we not have our own independence?”<sup>72</sup> Similar to the appeal of UNIA, connecting the struggle of non-elite Barbadians to Indian nationalism made poor, disenfranchised colonial subjects in a far-flung island colony feel part of a wider and more powerful transnational movement.

The public campaigns of black progressives also drew enormous crowds, such as a political rally for O’Neal in May of 1932. Some 900 members of the black middle and working classes attended, and listened to O’Neal lay out his platform for black welfare and advancement. In addition to his plans for free education and access to other social services, O’Neal attacked the oligarchical nature of the planter elite. White planters, he argued, did not understand how black Barbadians lived. “They are men who are not my colour,” he declared, and urged the crowd to elect candidates who stood “for fairplay and justice.”<sup>73</sup> The use of such racial rhetoric by the candidates is evidence of the power of Garveyism and pan-African thought in black Barbadian life. Black candidates capitalized on the promises of racial unity and black uplift popularized by the UNIA and other proponents of black internationalism to make a case for their political

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<sup>71</sup> BDA, GH 4/37/E, Detective Brathwaite to Detective Inspector, November 4, 1931.

<sup>72</sup> BDA, GH 4/37/E, Detective Brathwaite to Detective Inspector, October 30, 1931.

<sup>73</sup> BDA, GH 4/37/E, Detective Brathwaite to Detective Inspector, May 18, 1932.

leadership. These cases were becoming increasingly successful by the early 1930s; Charles Duncan O'Neal himself was elected in March 1932.<sup>74</sup>

The electoral changes, and the racially charged rhetoric of the candidates, shook the planter and merchant power elite of the island, as well as the governor. In his official dispatch to the Colonial Office in 1930, Governor Robertson wrote that the election was “the result of a definite campaign which has assumed some features of a racial contest.”<sup>75</sup> Governor Young was also suspicious of new non-white members of the House of Assembly, despite his reformist tendencies. In 1934, when the conservative black attorney Grantley Adams was elected, Young warned that the new member was “very bitter on the colour question. He is expected to be hostile to the Government.”<sup>76</sup> Even though Adams largely espoused views that aligned with elite Barbadians, his blackness made him an object of suspicion. Even though both governors constantly clashed with white elites throughout their respective tenures in Barbados, the despotic rule of planter and merchant elites at least assured stability in the island, no matter how brutal. These attitudes characterized British anxieties about black political inclusion since the post-emancipation era, when British liberals began to view former slaves as “unfit” for liberal citizenship and democratic participation.<sup>77</sup>

Despite the fears of the governors, legislation did not suddenly make a radical departure with the election of more black members to the House of Assembly. The Legislative Council was still comprised mostly of conservative elites, with John Hutson the only real voice for reform. When the occasional welfare or reform initiative made it before the Council, it was swiftly vetoed. Democratic League members remained the minority in the legislature, and their bills to

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<sup>74</sup> TNA, CO 28/311/15, Robertson to Cunliffe-Lister, September 20, 1932.

<sup>75</sup> TNA, CO 28/309/12, Robertson to Colonial Office, May 9, 1930.

<sup>76</sup> TNA, CO 28/313/19, Mark Young to Colonial Office, October 20, 1934.

<sup>77</sup> Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*; Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1832-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).



alleviate unemployment, expand the franchise, and fund education initiatives usually failed to attract enough votes to pass. Additionally, new members often succumbed to what Governor Robertson called “yielding to the spirit of the Assembly” and drastically tempered formerly progressive views.<sup>78</sup> For example, Erskine Ward, who had been a vocal proponent of health reform and expert medical direction while editing the *Advocate*, changed his views and lobbied to reduce the CMO to a part-time post after only a few months in the legislature.<sup>79</sup>

Remarkably, despite this slow pace of change, black Assembly members, with the help of Governor Young and a handful of liberal white reformers, succeeded in passing the first non-contributory Old Age Pension scheme in the British Empire in 1937. This coincided with increasing legislative attention to welfare initiatives in the mid-1930s, notably the 1936 Bridgetown Housing Act, which focused on slum clearance, and the distribution of free milk and biscuits to schoolchildren the following year. The reforms were driven by the harsh economic and social effects of the Great Depression in Barbados, which both the governor and newly elected Assembly members worked to address.<sup>80</sup> However, the extent of political change in the colony was always tempered by the personal and practical considerations of the candidates who reached office. One reason that meaningful reform legislation failed to succeed is because the goal of many newly elected black candidates was not to remain in the Assembly, something that Barbadian elites exploited when dealing with members that seemed too progressive. The reason for this was that becoming a barrister was one of the few accessible professional careers for black middle-class men to pursue, meaning that there were too many attorneys in Barbados for

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<sup>78</sup> TNA, CO 28/309/12, Robertson to Lord Passfield, May 9, 1930.

<sup>79</sup> BDA, House of Assembly debates, December 16, 1930, 549-550.

<sup>80</sup> Jeremy Seekings, “‘Pa’s Pension’: The Origins of Non-contributory Old-age Pensions in Late Colonial Barbados,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 35:4 (2007): 529-547.

the amount of legal work available.<sup>81</sup> As a result, by the 1930s politics had become a stepping stone for aspiring black lawyers to attain a more lucrative government job. For instance, when Erskine Ward advocated for reform policies that would benefit the working classes, he was then quickly offered a position as Police Magistrate. This more secure job convinced him to leave politics, and he was replaced by the conservative planter H. Graham Yearwood in the Assembly.<sup>82</sup> This was one of the many ways in which traditional elites maintained hegemony in Barbadian politics even in the midst of unprecedented electoral change.

The gap between the campaign promises of black candidates and the slow pace of change led working-class Barbadians to voice frustration. During the elections, UNIA members had expressed great hope for the possibility of black-led reform. In June 1932, for instance, when Chrissie Brathwaite spoke at a meeting, Melville Inniss called him “one of the great sons of Ethiopia” who would “stand up for us.” Similarly, Dr. H.G. Cummins, who had long worked for health reform in the colony, praised the election of Charles Duncan O’Neale and said “thank God, the time has come.”<sup>83</sup> Yet, as black Assembly members made only tepid attempts at reform initiatives or left politics for a more lucrative bureaucratic position, radical leaders angrily denounced the class divisions that compromised the possibility of racial unity in the colony. UNIA members like Melville Inniss complained that “the coloured men at the top” were doing nothing to help black workers, instead focusing on their own careers or interests. The only thing that black workers could do, then, was to “bind together.”<sup>84</sup> As always, though, the planter elite used their economic and social control over black workers to maintain hegemony over local affairs.

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<sup>81</sup> TNA, CO 28/309/12, Robertson to Lord Passfield, May 9, 1930.

<sup>82</sup> Crawford, *I Speak for the People*, 25-26; CO 28/311/15, Robertson to Cuniffe-Lister, September 20, 1932.

<sup>83</sup> BDA, GH 4/37/E, Detective Skeete to Detective Inspector, June 10, 1932.

<sup>84</sup> BDA, GH 4/37/E, Abstract of Intelligence No. 6 from Criminal Investigation Department, October 14, 1932.

## Continued radical activity

In the midst of these political shifts, Barbadian planters and merchants continued their longstanding efforts to discipline members of the few existing Barbadian labor and radical associations. The Workingmen's Association, which had reached its height in 1929, struggled to maintain its high numbers because of the harsh tactics of both planters and the state. During the 1929 Sugar Commission visit, WMA deputies testified that it was difficult to reach out to laborers because "intimidation prevents them from getting information from the Association. If anyone is seen coming for information he is victimized, and after victimization you know what happens." Additionally, the police always attended meetings and reported the proceedings to the government, which scared laborers and members away from attending or speaking.<sup>85</sup> In country meetings, drivers of the estates would attend to see who was present, take their names, and report them to the estate manager, who would forbid them to attend.<sup>86</sup>

These tactics had a real effect on the popularity of WMA and UNIA meetings in the colony. UNIA meetings, which had attracted as many as 800 attendees in previous years, were dwindling in numbers by the early 1930s. Yet despite the effectiveness of employer intimidation and police surveillance, radical ideas and literature continued to circulate within the colony. Visitors to the island reported instances of political meetings and discussions of international ideas concerning black liberation from racism and colonialism. Leonora E. Pritchett, a black American philanthropist who toured the West Indies, reported that Barbados was "race-conscious" and she "heard more discussion about Marcus Garvey in Barbados than anywhere

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<sup>85</sup> BDA, Pam 136 A, Proceedings of the West Indian Sugar Commission, Fourth Public Session, October 22, 1929, 58.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 59.

else.”<sup>87</sup> The Barbados government also actively banned publications that celebrated international black achievement, such as Nancy Cunard’s 1934 book, *Negro: An Anthology*.<sup>88</sup>

Port officials now often seized Pan-African and socialist literature arriving from abroad, but the pamphlets that they missed would appear at WMA and UNIA meetings. In September 1932, for example, the Barbadian police notified neighboring West Indian islands that they had found a copy of the *Negro Worker* in the possession of a Barbadian UNIA member. The police warned that the publication attempted “to stir up trouble amongst the black races of the world, and contains several articles with particular reference to the West Indies.”<sup>89</sup> The confiscated copy, which included an article addressed to West Indians in particular, urged Caribbean workers to take a more active role in “the building up of an anti-imperialist movement which will alone enable them to meet the tyrants on an equal footing.” Sending petitions and deputations to the British government was useless, it argued—West Indians should learn from India and Ireland and demonstrate in the streets, not put their faith in the promises of British imperialists.<sup>90</sup> While most Barbadians remained overtly loyal to the British Empire, articles such as these threatened to radicalize suffering Barbadian laborers who were seeing few benefits from British trusteeship of the Caribbean.

In June 1933, the Barbadian government seized twelve copies of the *West Indian Organizer* from a U.S. ship that arrived in Speightstown. The *Organizer*, which was published by a West Indian group in Harlem, urged the masses in all of the British Caribbean to “unite, organize and beat down the organized robbery of the white imperialists and their native com-

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<sup>87</sup> “Utopia Head, Back From West Indies, Pleased,” in *New York Amsterdam News*, September 22, 1934, 1.

<sup>88</sup> “Banning of Cunard Book in Barbados Scored,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 8, 1934, 1.

<sup>89</sup> BDA, GH 3/6/4, Criminal Investigation Department, Barbados, to Neighboring W.I. Islands, September 21, 1932.

<sup>90</sup> BDA, GH 3/6/4, “Trouble in the West Indies,” *The Negro Worker*, May 15, 1932.

patriots.”<sup>91</sup> In general, the publication was influenced by Marxist thought and pointed to the Soviet Union as the only country in the world in which workers had any freedom. In particular, the pamphlet included a letter specifically to Barbadian workers that decried that malnutrition and unemployment that marked black workers, and plantation laborers specifically. The author argued that conditions in Barbados were approaching those in South Africa, due to the “racial degradation” practiced by businesses in Barbados and discrimination of banks, steamship companies, and stores in Bridgetown. “In this respect our Island has well earned the title of ‘The Georgia of the West Indies.’ Such is the picture of the life of the masses after one hundred years of wage slavery.” The author urged workers to organize and warned that praying to God alone would not help, since the island’s power and wealth rested entirely in the hands of planters who kept them enslaved.<sup>92</sup> Likely written by a Barbadian migrant living in the U.S., the letter exemplifies the kinds of ideas that were filtering into Barbados during the early 1930s.

Additionally, a new local newspaper began to pick up some of these ideas and circulate them further. After Clennell Wickham was sued for libel in 1930 and forced to shut down the *Herald*, Barbados lost its main radical paper. Yet in November 1934, the leftist Barbadian journalist Wynter Crawford established the *Barbados Observer*, and stepped in where Wickham left off. He soon had plenty of material to report. The effects of radical ideas circulating through the Caribbean and the devastating economic and social effects of the Great Depression became apparent when disturbances and strikes broke out in British Honduras, Trinidad, British Guiana, St. Kitts, St. Vincent, and St. Lucia in 1934-1935. The labor unrest arose from the frustration of Caribbean workers with the chronically low wages and high cost of living that would seemingly never end. When combined with the legacy of labor organization and radical movements

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<sup>91</sup> BDA, GH 3/6/4, “Editorial,” *West Indian Organizer*, January 1933, 1.

<sup>92</sup> BDA, GH 3/6/4, “Open Letter to the Workers of Barbados,” *West Indian Organizer*, 5-7.

following the First World War, the stresses of the Depression years prompted West Indians to launch a number of efforts for change in the mid-1930s.

In St. Kitts, both agricultural and factory workers in the sugar industry went on strike due to decreases in their already miserably low wages in January 1935. The strike ended only when a British warship arrived and soldiers were deployed to the colony, resulting in three deaths and multiple injuries after troops fired into a crowd of protestors. In St. Vincent, after the Governor of the Windward Islands asked the legislature to increase taxes on commodities in October 1935, protests broke out against measures that would only further raise the cost of living in the colony. As tensions escalated into a riot, demonstrators attacked the court house and freed prisoners from the jail as the unrest soon spread to other parts of the island. Once again, the arrival of a British warship and troops brought a brutal end to the disorder. A similar pattern occurred in every colony in which strikes and disturbances took place. British warships and troops would arrive and, with the assistance of the local state and police, oversee a swift end to the unrest.<sup>93</sup> The *Observer* carried reports of the various disturbances on the front page. In early February 1935, for instance, the paper reported that striking laborers had been gunned down by the military in St. Kitts, while an editorial criticized the chronically low wages and appalling living conditions in the colony. According to the pseudonymous writer Pertinax, the lack of relief by the government meant that “Something was bound to happen sooner or later.”<sup>94</sup> The poor wages and high cost of living endured by striking workers in neighboring colonies would have sounded ominously familiar to Barbadian readers in the mid-1930s.

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<sup>93</sup> Richard Hart, “The Labour Rebellions of the 1930s,” in *Caribbean Freedom*, 370-375; O. Nigel Bolland, *On the March: Labour Rebellions in the British Caribbean, 1934-39* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1993).

<sup>94</sup> “Riot in St. Kitts,” *Barbados Observer*, February 2, 1935, 1; Pertinax, “It Seems to Me,” *Barbados Observer*, February 2, 1935, 6.

## Ethiopia

The Caribbean disturbances worried colonial officials, but forceful state action caused the strikes to dissipate by late 1935. However, during that year a conflict began overseas that would have wide-ranging consequences for West Indian discontent with imperial rule. In the fall of 1935, when Benito Mussolini's fascist forces invaded Ethiopia, the ensuing war became a watershed in the development of pan-African politics and consciousness throughout the West Indies as well as the wider African diaspora. Ethiopia held a special place in the imaginations of many who lived in the diaspora as a symbol of national ambition, as well as religious and cultural inspiration. The sole remaining African-led country had long been a prophetic symbol for black thinkers who took the Biblical passage "Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God" as a promise of black redemption worldwide.<sup>95</sup> This remained a potent symbol throughout the nineteenth century as the abolition of the slave trade, the emancipation of American slaves, and the successful Ethiopian repulsion of an Italian invading army at Adwa in 1896 seemed to mark the fulfillment of prophecy. For many across the diaspora, pro-Ethiopian solidarity culminated when Haile Selassie was crowned the emperor of Ethiopia in 1930. Claiming lineage to the Biblical figures Solomon and Sheba, for many he was a signal that black resurgence was on its way.<sup>96</sup> These hopes were challenged, however, as it seemed increasingly more likely that Europe would once again strike against Africa.

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<sup>95</sup> Psalm 68:31.

<sup>96</sup> For pro-Ethiopian sentiment across the diaspora, see Ken W.J. Post, "The Bible as Ideology: Ethiopianism in Jamaica, 1930-1938," in *African Perspectives*, ed. Christopher Allen and R.W. Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 185-207; William R. Scott, "And Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Its Hands": The Origins of Ethiopianism in Afro-American Thought, 1767-1896," *Umoja* 2 (1978): 1-14; George Shepperson, "Ethiopianism and African Nationalism," *Phylon* 14:1 (1962): 9-18; Robert G. Weisbord, "British West Indian Reaction to the Italian-Ethiopian War: An Episode in Pan-Africanism," *Caribbean Studies* 10:1 (Apr., 1970): 34-41; Kevin A. Yelvington, "The War in Ethiopia and Trinidad," in *The Colonial Caribbean in Transition*, 189-225; Fikru Negash Gebrikidan, *Bond Without Blood: A History of Ethiopian and New World Black Relations* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005). For analysis of the Ethiopian defeat of Italy and its legacy across the African diaspora, see

As Italy launched its war of aggression against the last independent African nation and the League of Nations stood by, it appeared to black colonial subjects worldwide that Europe would always aim to rule Africa and those of African descent. The invasion of Ethiopia became a rallying cry for people of African descent worldwide. Because of widespread symbolic ties to Ethiopia, many felt that Italian aggression in Africa was an attack against all people of African descent. For instance, when as a traveler from Africa Kwame Nkrumah arrived in Liverpool and saw headlines declaring Italy's invasion, he felt "as if the whole of London had declared war on me personally."<sup>97</sup> The idea of Ethiopia united such disparate areas as the American South, the West Indies, and South Africa. Across the British Empire, African and African-descended subjects clamored for Britain to help Ethiopia and expressed their desire to fight on the African nation's behalf.

London in particular churned with activity as African and West Indian activists like Jomo Kenyatta, George Padmore, C.L.R. James, and Harold Moody came together to protest the invasion. Many of these individuals had previously been divided, as residents of African colonies formed separate organizations from West Indians, or moderate reformers like Moody clashed with radicals like Padmore. However, outcry over the war prompted a sense that all people of African descent shared similar experiences of oppression, betrayal, and racism that transcended the boundaries of class and nationality. James and Padmore formed the International African Service Bureau (IASB), which mobilized support for Selassie and demanded self-determination in Africa and the Caribbean, especially influencing West African students and later national liberation movements. Even the moderate League of Coloured Peoples (LCP) became

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Paulos Milkias and Getachew Metaferia, eds, *The Battle of Adwa: Reflections on Ethiopia's Historic Victory Against European Colonialism* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2006).

<sup>97</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (New York: International Publishers, 1957), 27.



increasingly politicized as the Ethiopian conflict intensified. Its normally subdued publication, *The Keys*, wrote angrily that “Italian poison gas and British oil defeated the Abyssinians” in a “shameless rape of a coloured Empire,” an injustice that “the world’s coloured population” would not forget.”<sup>98</sup> The conflict caused the LCP, which had previously been interested in combating racism in Britain, to become more focused on colonial matters.

British policy in the conflict alienated more black activists as they came to relate British hesitance to act in Ethiopia with the empire’s overall lack of concern for African-descended people. The Trinidadian activist George Padmore wrote blistering editorials criticizing European policy towards Africa. As he declared in 1937, “Throughout the history of predatory Imperialism there has never been a case of such cynicism and treachery as the betrayal of Abyssinia by Great Britain and France, the nations which are supposed to be the bulwarks of the League of Nations and the defenders of ‘Collective Security.’”<sup>99</sup> This perceived European betrayal of Africa became a turning point in pan-African consciousness. As Guyanese-born Ras Makonnen later remarked, the Ethiopian conflict “brought home to many black people the reality of colonialism,” convincing them that it “was a force to be reckoned with, because here it was attacking the black man’s last citadel.”<sup>100</sup> Throughout 1935 and 1936, black colonial activist groups in London held demonstrations in Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square, lobbied Parliament through Independent Labour Party MPs, and published blistering editorials and pamphlets condemning British policy towards the invasion of Ethiopia.

Despite continued censorship efforts by colonial governments, the publications of West Indian activists in London circulated throughout the Caribbean, where black subjects conducted

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<sup>98</sup> “Comment,” *The Keys* 4:1 (Jul-Sept 1936), 2.

<sup>99</sup> George Padmore, *Africa and World Peace*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (London: Frank Cass, 1972), 123

<sup>100</sup> Ras Makonnen, *Pan-Africanism from Within*, ed. Kenneth King (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1973), 116-117.

fundraisers, held prayer meetings and rallies, and petitioned the British government to allow them to volunteer for military service against Italy. For instance, in February 1936 the Colonial Office received a petition from the Jamaican UNIA for permission to send volunteers to fight the Italians in Ethiopia, while in Dominica, the Government House blamed widespread unrest and strikes on “ignorant criticism of the attitude adopted by England” towards Ethiopia.”<sup>101</sup> The London *Times* also linked West Indian disturbances to the conflict, warning that riots in St. Vincent demonstrated that the Ethiopian war had “dangerous repercussions on the coloured populations of our Empire” as “indignation, resentment, and distrust” swelled throughout the Caribbean and Africa.<sup>102</sup>

The worldwide depression and widespread unemployment also led nascent West Indian labor movements to merge their grievances with those of Ethiopia. In Trinidad, as Kevin Yelvington has argued, Afro-Trinidadians involved in labor unions used the war to address local issues of wages and political rights, using the language of “blackness” as an ideological identification to back appeals for reform and independence.<sup>103</sup> Additionally, the conflict aroused more than just racial identifications in these areas. The Ethiopian War also amplified anti-colonial feelings that involved issues of class, economic and political power, and identity formation. The agitation became so widespread that the Colonial Office monitored West Indian activity and kept branches in Africa apprised of the situation.

Like many other West Indians, Barbadians followed the events closely. In the months leading up to war, the moderate *Advocate* covered the diplomatic tensions heavily, while Crawford’s *Observer* printed headlines about the Ethiopian conflict alongside news of West

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<sup>101</sup> TNA, CO318/418/4, Italo-Abyssinian Conflict: West Indian Reactions, February 12, 1936; November 12, 1935.

<sup>102</sup> Hesketh Bell, “Coloured Race Uneasy: Repercussions from Ethiopia, St. Vincents Riots,” *The Times* October 25, 1935, 15.

<sup>103</sup> Yelvington, “The War in Ethiopia and Trinidad,” 189-225.

Indian unrest. On the same day that the *Observer* reported about military violence against laborers in St. Kitts, the paper also carried a lengthy story about how Mussolini was going against the “Last African Monarch” while “European Nations Sit Calmly By.”<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, the paper began speaking out against British complicity in the conflict. A blistering editorial in August 1935 pointed out the hypocrisy of Britain’s role in the peace negotiations since it was a nation that had “conquered half the world.”<sup>105</sup> When the war began in October, coverage of Ethiopia eclipsed other stories, both international and local, in all of the major Barbadian newspapers.

In addition to reports on Ethiopia, the *Observer* carried news of racial discrimination in the U.S. and Britain, and reported on the increasing incidence of riots connected to the Ethiopian conflict. On the front page of a September 1935 issue, the paper reported about a “race riot” in Paris, in which black French colonial subjects marched through Paris and clashed with French police over “the support which white France is rendering Mussolini.” According to the article, “All coloured colonial subjects and citizens of France stand as one man behind Abyssinia.”<sup>106</sup> The paper also carried reports of Ethiopia-related strikes and boycotts in the West Indies, such as when activists in nearby St. Lucia appealed to the Colonial Office for permission to fight in Ethiopia.<sup>107</sup>

The effects of so much coverage meant that the distant war became part of Barbadian daily life. Reverends preached about the plight of Ethiopia during Sunday services, referring to the place of Abyssinia in the Bible and calling upon Barbadians to pray for a resolution to the

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<sup>104</sup> “Mussolini Encroaches Upon Last African Monarch,” *Barbados Observer*, February 2, 1935, 5.

<sup>105</sup> Pertinax, “Mussolini’s Violent Outburst Against Dark Races,” *Barbados Observer*, August 24, 1935, 6.

<sup>106</sup> “Race Riots in Paris,” *Barbados Observer*, September 21, 1935, 1.

<sup>107</sup> “St. Lucia to Boycott Italy,” *Barbados Observer*, October 12, 1935, 1.

conflict.<sup>108</sup> An editorialist for the *Barbados Weekly Herald* reported that the “Italo-Ethiopian dispute was the subject preached at nearly all the churches” visited the previous Sunday.<sup>109</sup> The coverage was so effective that in July 1936, 3,000 Barbadians attended a meeting in Bridgetown about the proposed lifting of sanctions against Italy. The participants passed a resolution in opposition to “the threatened lifting of sanctions against Italy in the Italo-Ethiopian conflict and urges upon His Majesty's Government the necessity and moral duty of maintaining the same.”<sup>110</sup> The public mobilization for a far away African nation had profound consequences in Barbados. Despite the color line and racial prejudice that marked Barbadian life, most Barbadians considered discussions of race unrespectable. Yet, Grantley Adams would point to the Ethiopian conflict as the first time he saw “any beginning of the people talking white as against black.”<sup>111</sup> Discussions that were previously confined to UNIA meetings or other radical organizations now became widespread and acceptable. As another commentator recalled, activists and aspiring politicians “preached the colour question and took advantage of the Italo-Ethiopian war” to gain votes.<sup>112</sup> The war had stirred an unprecedented amount of pan-African consciousness, as residents of Barbados and other isolated West Indian colonies came to identify the betrayal of Ethiopians with the struggles of all black people.

The Labour Advisor for the Colonial Office would later blame the war for highlighting “the clash of colour,” as the invasion of Ethiopia “attracted considerable attention in the West Indies as an example of a deliberate attack by a white man upon a coloured race.”<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, the Ethiopian conflict affected how the historically loyal populations of the Caribbean saw the

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<sup>108</sup> “The Church and the Abyssinian Question: Interesting Extract From Rev. Blackett’s Sermon,” *Barbados Observer*, August 24, 1935, 5.

<sup>109</sup> “Fair Comment,” *Barbados Weekly Herald*, September 7, 1935, 6.

<sup>110</sup> TNA, CO 318/421/5, Mark Young to Ormsby-Gore, July 4, 1936.

<sup>111</sup> Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 4

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>113</sup> BDA, GH 3/5/8, “Report on Labour Conditions in the West Indies,” Section III by Major St. J. Orde Browne, O.B.E. March 4, 1940, 1.

British Empire. As Lord Olivier later stated in Parliament, “the action of the Government in regard to Abyssinia has produced a very serious effect of prejudice in the West Indies against the good faith of the British Government. It has had a considerable effect on public opinion out there.”<sup>114</sup> By 1936, British reluctance to aid Ethiopia had become yet another chink in the legitimacy of British trusteeship.

### **Warning from the West Indies**

Criticism of British colonialism did not just come from colonial subjects, however. The 1930s also saw a surge in metropolitan condemnation of empire. The most blatant criticism came from members of the British Left. Disillusioned officials within the Labour Party, such as Sydney Olivier, criticized “trusteeship imperialism” and argued for “more energetic development” on behalf of native welfare.<sup>115</sup> British communists like Tommy Jackson had long been circulating critiques of the patterns of capitalist expansion and exploitation of subject peoples inherent to colonialism, and the Great Depression years only strengthened their arguments.<sup>116</sup> The Independent Labour Party, working closely with colonial pan-Africanists like George Padmore, began to argue that the liberation of British workers was tied to the emancipation of colonial laborers worldwide.<sup>117</sup> As anti-colonial activists and members of the British left circulated evidence of the suffering endured by British subjects under colonialism, the empire came under increasing metropolitan backlash.

British academics also joined this chorus of imperial criticism. When the Scottish historian William Macmillan traveled to the West Indies in 1934-1935, he was shocked by the neglect of the islands. A longstanding critic of colonialism, Macmillan published his perceptions

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<sup>114</sup> *Hansard*, House of Lords Debates (hereafter HL Deb), June 2, 1938, vol 109, col. 895.

<sup>115</sup> Owen, “Critics of Empire in Britain,” 194-195.

<sup>116</sup> Stephen Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics: The Left and the End of Empire, 1918-1966* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 53-67.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-81.

about the British Caribbean in his 1936 book *Warning from the West Indies*. The book famously recounted the many failings of British colonialism in the Caribbean, and became an indictment of British trusteeship as a whole. Remarking on the region's high mortality rates, epidemic diseases, rampant malnutrition, poor education, low wages, harsh labor laws, and inefficient local governments, Macmillan painted a dismal scene of imperial negligence. He called upon the British government to take responsibility for this impoverished corner of the empire. "There is an overwhelming case for the contention that the Mother Country owes it to her colonies to embark on a considered policy of expenditure to make up for past neglect," he wrote.<sup>118</sup> Development, he argued, could no longer be about benefitting the British economy, but about fulfilling Britain's special trust to help West Indian people achieve a better standard of life.

When the West Indies Department received the book, the clerks read the tract with much interest and agreed that the West Indian colonies were in a dire state. In particular, Dr. A.J.H. O'Brien, Chief Medical Advisor to the Colonial Office, agreed that Macmillan's chapter on health conditions was "a true statement of facts and in no way an exaggeration." He, too, condemned the policy that a colony had to "pay its own way and that funds for improvements should come from local resources." Indeed, he argued that such a strategy would not be possible "if a decent standard of health is to be maintained." Echoing the paternalistic intervention espoused by Macmillan, O'Brien called upon the British government to fulfill its duty to West Indian people and pursue a more aggressive development policy. "We are trustees of these Islands, and while considerable help has been provided during the last five years from Colonial Development Fund for health schemes we should continue to provide such help."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> W.M. Macmillan, *Warning from the West Indies: A Tract for Africa and the Empire* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 196.

<sup>119</sup> TNA, CO 318/422/9, Minute by Dr. A.J.H. O'Brien, September 22, 1936.

Yet, despite these calls for a greater economic commitment to the floundering colonies, West Indian Department officials continued to claim in private correspondence that the problems were out of the control of the Colonial Office.<sup>120</sup> They laid *Warning from the West Indies* aside and maintained the strategy of colonial self-sufficiency, even as alarms continued to sound. When Sir Edward Davson, a member of the Colonial Development Advisory Committee, visited the West Indies in May 1936, he joined in the chorus of warnings about the political upheaval brewing in the Caribbean. Discussing Barbados in particular, he warned that the “oligarchical” constitution and government of the colony was in danger. As more of the black population gained the right to vote and entered the legislature, he predicted that Barbadians would no longer protect their “ancient Constitution.”<sup>121</sup> His words would soon become prophetic.

The first sign of serious trouble came in June 1937, when Trinidadian oil workers led by the labor organizer Tubal Uriah “Buzz” Butler initiated a peaceful sit-down strike to press for higher wages and improved working conditions. Strikes and demonstrations had broken out in Trinidad in 1934 and 1935, but had slowly petered out due to police action and disorganization. The 1937 strike, however, was different. Butler’s labor movement benefited from the prior organizing activities of groups like the Negro Welfare Cultural and Social Association (NWCSA), a socialist and pan-Africanist group that had mobilized Trinidadian workers in large numbers during the Ethiopian War and had a large network of activism in the north of the colony. When this groundwork of agitation and organization merged with the devastating economic and social consequences of the Depression, conditions were in place for a major disturbance.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> TNA, CO 318/422/9, Minute by W. Beckett, May 25, 1936.

<sup>121</sup> TNA, CO 28/316/7, Extract from notes on a recent visit to British Guiana and the West Indies by Sir Edward Davson, May 29, 1936.

<sup>122</sup> Bolland, *On the March*, 82-110. For more on leading up to the rebellion in Trinidad, see Susan Craig, *Smiles and Blood: The Ruling Class Response to the Workers’ Rebellion of 1937 in Trinidad and Tobago* (London: New Beacon Books, 1988). On the rebellion itself, see the essays in Roy Thomas, ed., *The Trinidad Labour Riots of*

After Butler organized his peaceful sit-down strike, the Trinidadian police responded with typical repression and tried to arrest Butler. His hundreds of followers, frustrated with the use of Trinidadian state force against peaceful labor organization, responded violently to the police action and attacked the officers, killing two. Conflicts between laborers and the police then spread throughout the entire colony as workers in all industries joined the strikes and rebellions. As the disorders spread, the Trinidadian government dispatched volunteer forces and called upon British naval ships to put down the strikes and demonstrations with force. Within two weeks, British troops and Trinidadian police, combined with press censorship, succeeded in breaking the general strike. Fourteen were killed, dozens wounded, and hundreds were arrested by the end of the unprecedented disturbances.<sup>123</sup> In Barbados, newspaper headlines carried reports of the Trinidad disorders, but government business went on as usual. Surely, such mayhem could never occur in “Little England.”

## Conclusion

By the mid-1930s, the West Indies provided a bleak picture of imperial neglect and mismanagement. Rudimentary development policies designed to benefit Britain required colonies to repay onerous loans, an impossible undertaking for cash-strapped local governments. Throughout the Caribbean, poor workers became increasingly desperate as wages stagnated, the cost of living increased, and colonial states remained more focused on enforcing security than providing aid. At the same time, as the British Empire continued making claims to colonial trusteeship, it took no action to intervene on behalf of its miserable subjects. In Barbados, the

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1937: *Perspectives 50 Years Later* (St. Augustine, Trinidad: Extra-Mural Studies Unit, University of the West Indies, 1987).

<sup>123</sup> W. Richard Jacobs, “The Politics of Protest in Trinidad: The Strikes and Disturbances of 1937,” *Caribbean Studies* 17:1-2 (1977): 5-54; Howard Johnson, “Oil, imperial policy and the Trinidad disturbances, 1937,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 4:1 (1975): 29-54; Bolland, *On the March*, 82-110; Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Global Empires, 1918-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 235-255.



consequences of the Depression, the indifference of the local state, and British neglect were tragically displayed on the bodies of poor Barbadians. As destitute families lost their jobs, crowded into unsanitary and disease-ridden homes, went to bed hungry, and watched their children die, it became apparent that no one was going to help.

Yet, the despair of Barbadian workers coincided with dramatic changes on both the local and international level. At home, the shifting electoral map meant that black politicians were taking part in the government at an unprecedented rate. The health disputes of the 1920s had starkly revealed the indifference of the Barbadian state to the welfare of the masses, and black politicians capitalized on popular dissatisfaction during the early 1930s. Although class divisions precluded more widespread political movements based on racial unity and economic liberation, international ideas continued to filter in and offer alternatives to British colonialism for black workers. This came at a crucial time. The depression years not only exposed again the incompetence of white rule, but also the failure of the British government to intervene on behalf of Barbadian welfare. The Ethiopian war showed that British officials were just as indifferent to black suffering as white Barbadian oligarchs, and radical indictments of imperialism and racism appeared more prescient than ever before to a desperate population. The Trinidad disturbances were the first result of the legacy of imperial neglect, economic exploitation, and social malaise in the West Indies. The others that followed would force the British government to radically change the way that it managed the empire.

## Chapter Six

### “A West Indian nation is in the process of birth”: Caribbean Riots and Policy Revolution

#### Introduction

In March 1937, an activist named Clement Osbourne Payne disembarked from a passenger ship in Bridgetown. Payne, who had grown up in Barbados, had spent the previous decade in Trinidad, where he became involved in the Marxist and pan-African Negro Welfare Cultural and Social Association (NWCSA).<sup>1</sup> In 1937, the NWCSA sent Payne to Barbados to educate workers in revolutionary socialism and initiate strikes.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of five months, Payne recruited a number of local Garveyites and activists like Israel Lovell and Ulric Grant to spread the message that Barbadian workers would only see an improvement in their conditions if they organized. In a number of public meetings in Bridgetown between May and July, Payne and his lieutenants articulated the grievances of the working classes and continuously broadcast the argument that “the capitalists were oppressing the people” and ordinary Barbadians were being “kept down by people at the top.”<sup>3</sup> They urged growing crowds to “Remember your mother country which is Africa,” arguing that white Barbadians had little regard for the struggles of black workers.<sup>4</sup> Using rhetoric drawn from socialism and black internationalism, Payne and his

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<sup>1</sup> On the NWCSA, see Rhoda Reddock, *Elma François, the NWCSA and the Worker's Struggle for Change in the Caribbean* (London: New Beacon Books, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Woodville K. Marshall, “Clement Payne in the City,” unpublished paper, 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> TNA, CO 28/321/12, Testimony of Rufus Skeete at the Court of Grand Sessions, Enclosure in despatch, March 14, 1938.

deputies energized the Barbadian masses by locating the sources of working-class distress and charting a solution through racially based labor organization.

Payne's message came at a crucial time. The Depression years had worsened the already miserable economic conditions of Barbadian workers, many of whom suffered from destitution and malnourishment. The Barbadian government had proven its continued indifference to the problems of the struggling multitudes by refusing to implement health reforms and unemployment plans. Additionally, the memory of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia was fresh in popular memory. This not only contributed to a rising racial consciousness, but also raised concerns that just as the British government had not been willing to support Africans in their struggle against Italian imperialism, now it would not come to the aid of its black subjects. These factors, when combined with the news of protests and disturbances in Trinidad, made it clear that black laborers in the Caribbean were on the verge of revolt. Using his extensive experience as an agitator in Trinidad, Payne was able to organize Barbadian workers more effectively than previous attempts by UNIA and Charles Duncan O'Neale. By July, his movement became so popular that thousands of working class men and women attended Payne's public meetings in Bridgetown.

The scale of Payne's movement alarmed Barbadian officials, who worked to find cause to remove this powerful leader of the black working class. They found the cause in a technicality. While Payne had been born in Trinidad, he had always believed himself to be Barbadian. Thus when he initially disembarked on the island, he stated Barbados as his place of birth. In late July he was arrested for making a false statement to immigration authorities. When Payne was convicted on July 22, he led his followers on a peaceful protest march to Government House while out on bail. In response, Payne and several of his followers were arrested. For the next

three nights, protesters gathered in Bridgetown and threatened to release Payne from custody themselves. As the crowds mounted, the Court of Appeals voted to overturn Payne's initial conviction, and his followers eagerly gathered outside the court on July 26 to greet their leader. Yet, Payne was not released. Instead, the police secretly transported him to a ship for deportation to Trinidad that evening.<sup>5</sup> Payne's followers would never see him again.

The Barbadian laborers who had been loyal to Payne saw his clandestine deportation as further proof that justice was inaccessible in Barbados, where conditions had been so unfair for so long.<sup>6</sup> Many Barbadians pointed to Payne's removal as evidence that the local government would never allow black workers to seek better conditions. Amongst the crowds that continued to gather throughout Bridgetown, a common phrase was "Because he opening we eyes they are trying to lock him up."<sup>7</sup> On July 27, these frustrations came to a head when hundreds of Barbadian workers rioted in the city. The unrest rocked the normally peaceful colony. Over the course of three days, protestors overturned cars, burned and looted stores, and vandalized public buildings throughout Bridgetown. The events took a dramatic and tragic turn when the police began firing into the crowds. The ruthless response of the Barbadian state resulted in fourteen deaths and dozens of injuries.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the violent reprisals, the rebellion spread from Bridgetown to the country districts as estate laborers looted crops and set fires to cane fields. When black workers began their revolt in the city, and news spread to the countryside, rural laborers followed as they came to understand that all poor Barbadians shared the same experiences of malnutrition, poverty, and

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<sup>5</sup> Bolland, *The Politics of Labour*, 281-283.

<sup>6</sup> Wynter Crawford, *I Speak for the People*, 42-43.

<sup>7</sup> Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 5. Numerous works have recounted and analyzed the events of the Barbados disturbances in detail. See, for instance, Hilary Beckles, *Chattel House Blues: Making a Democratic Society in Barbados: From Clement Payne to Owen Arthur* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003), Browne, *Race, Class, Politics*, George Belle, "The Struggle for Political Democracy: the 1937 Riots," in *Emancipation III*, 56-91. For the West Indies disturbances more broadly, see Bolland, *The Politics of Labour*.

<sup>8</sup> TNA, CO 28/319/8, Mark Young to William Ormsby-Gore, August 4, 1937.

injustice. In the midst of the chaos, a Barbadian nation was forming.<sup>9</sup> As unrest spread throughout the colony, Governor Young called upon a British warship. The ship rapidly deployed two platoons of British soldiers to enforce peace on the island. By the third day, the actions of the Barbados police and British troops caused the riots in Bridgetown to subside, though rural workers continued to raid fields for food throughout the countryside.<sup>10</sup>

While the unrest lasted only a few days, its scale astonished officials at the Colonial Office and elsewhere in the Caribbean. White Barbadian elites, assured in their power over poor Barbadians through land and wage monopolies and a punitive justice system, had underestimated the effect of pan-African and socialist thought in Barbados when combined with the horrific economic conditions of the Depression years. British colonial administrators worked to avoid the same mistake. As the Barbados disturbances came to an end, the governor of Jamaica, Edward Denham, wrote to the Colonial Office warning that the violence would spread. According to the governor, “Conditions in the West Indies need watching and the recent happenings in Trinidad and Barbados may have repercussions here- where there is plenty of material for a conflagration.”<sup>11</sup> Tensions remained high in London as government officers grappled with the possibility of a Caribbean-wide revolution. The *Barbados Advocate* reported that “another far flung unit of the British Empire had gone wrong,” and warned of more trouble to come.<sup>12</sup> On the heels of the recent Trinidad riots, the rebellion in Barbados indicated to an increasingly dismayed Colonial Office that the “warning from the West Indies” had gone too long unheeded.

Initially, the Colonial Office continued its longstanding policy of waiting for colonial governments to fix their own problems, rather than relying on imperial oversight and funding.

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<sup>9</sup> Chamberlain, *Empire and Nation-Building in the Caribbean*, 95.

<sup>10</sup> TNA, CO 28/319/8, Mark Young to William Ormsby-Gore, August 4, 1937.

<sup>11</sup> TNA, CO 318/427/11, Edward Denham to Cosmo Parkinson, July 30, 1937.

<sup>12</sup> *Barbados Advocate*, July 28, 1937, quoted in Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, iii.

Thus when a local commission in Barbados delivered a scathing report regarding the bleak social and economic conditions in the island, colonial officials were satisfied to assign the blame for the disturbances solely on West Indian elites, rather than also attributing the problems to British neglect. However, the black radical community in London refused to allow the British government to deny its culpability for the poverty and dysfunction of the Caribbean colonies. Calling increasing public attention to the suffering and exploitation endured by black subjects under British rule, pan-African groups in the metropole used their contacts within the British Left to pressure the Colonial Office in Parliament and in the British press. Public discourse in Britain increasingly focused on West Indian problems and the apparent failure of colonial trusteeship in the region.<sup>13</sup> In the United States, African-American journalists like A.M. Wendell Malliet wrote that the arrival of warships to quell the unrest suggested that “Great Britain is pursuing her traditional policy of tyranny- as is her wont with her colored colonials.”<sup>14</sup> As headlines from New York to London carried news of the disturbances, West Indian workers made it plain to the world the deep failures of British trusteeship. By the time that serious riots broke out in Jamaica in May 1938, colonial officials could no longer argue that colonial governments bore sole responsibility for the economic and social problems of the West Indies.

The result would be a sea change in the relationship between Great Britain and its colonies. While the Colonial Office had been reevaluating its position towards trusteeship and colonial development since the mid-1930s, the Caribbean disturbances spurred the process along.<sup>15</sup> The riots had led to a growing awareness of the power of mass movements on the part of poor Barbadians who joined together to protest their economic and political disenfranchisement.

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<sup>13</sup> Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics*, 90.

<sup>14</sup> A.M. Wendell Malliet, “West Indians and Troubles Cause Study: Foreign,” in *New York Amsterdam News*, September 18, 1937, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, “Conversion of British Official Classes to the Development Idea,” 55.

The disturbances also forced the British government to recognize that it could no longer pursue the same policies, as the forces of ideological change had mobilized colonial populations *en masse*. Ironically then, starting in 1937, exploited colonial workers on the one hand and imperial officials on the other came to the same conclusion: “that poor black people were not powerless.”<sup>16</sup> The actions of frustrated Caribbean laborers would force the British government to take an unprecedented step in its policy towards the empire.

At the same time, despite their influence, the riots did not herald a new era of revolutionary change led by Barbadian working-class radicals. As Nigel Bolland has argued, in political terms the result of the unrest was “the elimination through deportation and imprisonment of the radical nationalists and the strengthening of the reformist progressives.”<sup>17</sup> Following the riots, middle-class politicians who had also come to recognize the power of working class support began to frame themselves as protectors of Barbadian workers. These claims were articulated through promises of wages, health, and welfare, which the British government had long failed to provide. In the aftermath of the riots, black politicians drew upon the longstanding imperial language of trusteeship and development to make a case for their leadership of the Barbadian government, attain greater access to the rights of imperial citizenship, and restrain the threat of revolutionary activism. In addition to transforming late colonial policy, the consequences of the disturbances would also change emerging understandings of West Indian nations.

### **The Deane Commission**

After several days of disturbances in the city and countryside, the forceful actions of the police and British Marines caused the rioting and looting to subside in Barbados. In total, 666

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<sup>16</sup> Chamberlain, *Empire and Nation-Building in the Caribbean*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Bolland, *The Politics of Labour*, 290.

people were charged for offenses ranging from shop-breaking and theft to “riotous assembly” and sedition following the unrest.<sup>18</sup> The swift and brutal response of the Barbadian authorities resulted in the highest number of fatalities and some of the harshest sentences in all of the West Indian disturbances, with some rioters punished with as much as ten years of hard labor. Yet, the scale of the unrest throughout the colony had made it clear that state-led repression alone would not be enough to prevent further protest by Barbadian workers, who were now well aware of the liberatory promises of socialism and pan-Africanism. Middle-class black politicians came to recognize the organizing potential of the black masses, and immediately worked to frame themselves as leaders, advocates, and spokespeople for Barbadian workers. On the third day of the disturbances, five Assembly members, including Chrissie Brathwaite, Grantley Adams, and H.A. Vaughan, met with Governor Young to urge rapid reform. They asked the governor to call a commission to investigate the causes of the disturbances and make recommendations to improve the standard of living of the working classes. Consequently, on July 29, Young, who was eager to assuage the restive population, publicly announced a commission to inquire into the difficulties of workers.<sup>19</sup>

The commission began hearing testimony within a mere two weeks after the disturbances ended. Comprised of three Barbadians, the Deane Commission took its name from the chairman, George Deane, a retired white judge. The second commissioner, M.A. Murphy, was a retired Director of Public works. The appointment of two retired white officials hardly seemed to promise meaningful reform in the racially divided island, but the proceedings were heavily influenced by the third commissioner, Erskine Ward, a black liberal magistrate who had advocated reforms to benefit the working classes during his brief tenure in the House of

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<sup>18</sup> TNA, CO 28/319/8, Mark Young to William Ormsby-Gore, October 2, 1937.

<sup>19</sup> BDA, GH 4/109, Public Notice by Mark Young, July 29, 1937.



Assembly.<sup>20</sup> For twenty days, the commissioners heard testimony from a wide swathe of the colony's population, ranging from sugar planters to estate laborers. Day after day, workers and professionals from around the island testified about the low wages and high cost of living that made life miserable for the majority of the island's residents, while planters and merchants scrambled to defend their actions and practices. The Barbadian press covered the proceedings widely, which demonstrated the appalling conditions under which many Barbadians lived.

Laborers on sugar estates experienced the most miserable conditions. According to H.A. Vaughan, a black barrister and member of the House of Assembly, wages for agricultural workers had not improved since emancipation.<sup>21</sup> A peasant farmer from St. Lucy, Fitzgerald Greaves, testified that sugar laborers and their wives and children needed at least thirty cents a day for food alone, but most made much less than that. Many lived in houses without flooring, and stuffed holes in the roof or walls with paper.<sup>22</sup> While many planters and merchants tried to downplay the economic hardships experienced by so many workers, some shopkeepers confirmed that the cost of living had skyrocketed while wages stagnated. Arnold Griffith, a carpenter married to a shopkeeper in St. Lucy, explained that over the course of three years the price of cornmeal had doubled and rice had increased by 50 percent.<sup>23</sup> H.O. Emtage, a provision merchant in Bridgetown, revealed that increased food prices meant the cost of living for the working classes had gone up 25 percent in the last year alone.<sup>24</sup> The dramatic increase in the cost of staple products had drastic consequences for the island's destitute residents.

The social consequences of this widespread inequality and poverty made for particularly compelling testimony. Medical care remained out of reach for most Barbadians, who were forced

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<sup>20</sup> Crawford, *I Speak for the People*, 45.

<sup>21</sup> Testimony of H.A. Vaughan in Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Testimony of Fitzgerald Greaves in Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Testimony of Arnold Christopher Griffith, in Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Testimony of H.O. Emtage, in Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 58-64.

to live with chronic illnesses. Hugh Gordon Cummins, a physician, testified that if working people sought treatment for venereal disease, they lost “practically a half day’s pay” and often went untreated.<sup>25</sup> Reverend F. Godson, a Methodist minister who had been stationed in Speightstown and St. Lucy since 1916, spoke about his personal experience with poor villagers. He reported that during his initial work in St. Lucy the area of Crab Hill and neighboring villages had “the worst poverty and destitution I ever saw.” Because of drought, poor wages, and the high price of food, he saw “hunger, rags, dilapidated shacks, idling, and praedial larceny on an exceptional scale.” Barbadians, he argued, needed “a fair share,” which he defined as food, clothing, shelter, “a few of the comforts and pleasure they see so lavishly displayed around them,” and provision for sickness and old age.<sup>26</sup> Several of witnesses also testified that although the British government had repeatedly promised to improve the quality of life for all its subjects nothing had come of it.

As the proceedings continued, it became clear that a major cause of the unrest lay in the mounting anger of poor Barbadians with class inequality in the colony. Assembly member Grantley Adams explained that “there was a widespread feeling that the wealthy class ignored the wishes of the people” who felt “they could not expect much from the wealthy class.”<sup>27</sup> This extended to distrust and dissatisfaction with the local state. F.A. Small, a former president of the Workingmen’s Association, declared that the government had always neglected the welfare of all but elite Barbadians. As he argued, “All Government exists for the well-being of the community, for the protection of life and property and, as we saw that the masses of the people were being neglected, we were sure that this riot was bound to come.”<sup>28</sup> For years, the Barbadian

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<sup>25</sup> Testimony of H.G. Cummins, in Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 108.

<sup>26</sup> Testimony of F. Godson, in Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 74.

<sup>27</sup> Testimony of Grantley Adams, in Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Testimony of F.A. Small, in Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 103.

government had broken this social contract to protect the masses. These sentiments were echoed in the press. As Wynter Crawford wrote in the *Observer*, the disturbances showed that the government had not acted to address the people's grievances: "The fact emerges unmistakably clear, that as a whole, the island cannot be enamoured of her elected representatives."<sup>29</sup> Clearly many Barbadians were questioning the legitimacy of a government unwilling to implement reforms that would meet the basic economic and social needs of most working and poor islanders.

Despite condemnation of elite rule in the island and sympathy for the hardship experienced by laboring classes, most Barbadians who testified before the Deane Commission were critical of the disturbances and distanced themselves from Clement Payne's movement.<sup>30</sup> Grantley Adams, who acted as Payne's attorney when he was arrested, claimed that Payne "had not been sincere" and was "a strange sort of bird" who was just trying to take money from his followers. Additionally, while Adams portrayed himself as an advocate for the working classes, he argued that those who rioted "were undisciplined, lawless young men; they were not bona fide workingmen."<sup>31</sup> In general, the testimony reflected a dichotomy between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" resistance to government power in Barbados. "Acceptable" resistance included organizing into trade unions and electing reformist Assembly members, while mass protests, radical political movements, and looting fell under the category of "unacceptable" resistance. H.A. Vaughan, who defended strikes led by engineers in early July, made a clear distinction between respectable, organized labor movements and Payne's "extreme doctrines."<sup>32</sup> The commissioners themselves concluded that participants in the riots were "lawless persons" and

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<sup>29</sup> Wynter Crawford, "It Appears to Me," *Barbados Observer*, August 7, 1937, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Lawrence E. Fisher, *Colonial Madness: Mental Health in the Barbadian Social Order* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 35.

<sup>31</sup> Testimony of Grantley Adams, in Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 2-4.

<sup>32</sup> Testimony of H.A. Vaughan, in Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 12.

“young and irresponsible youths and young women,” not honorable Barbadians.<sup>33</sup> While Payne’s movement and the resulting unrest led to wider public awareness of the struggles of poor Barbadians, they also led to the end of radical political activity in the island as more moderate political leaders began to steer the course of reform.

When the Deane Commission published its final recommendations, the report was full of indignation at the standard of living borne by so many Barbadians. The commissioners stated that wages for many Barbadian workers were “definitely inadequate to provide the bare necessities of existence,” and stated that “there can be no justification short of the bankruptcy of trade and industry for the maintenance of so low a standard of wages.” Expressing rage at the comfortable standard of living enjoyed by planters and merchants at the expense of workers, the report called for an increase in wage rates to remove “hatred and bitterness” from “the majority of employees.”<sup>34</sup> The commissioners concluded that “the prisoner is better fed than the lowest grade of agricultural laborer.” It was “essential that the daily dietary of the agricultural labourer should be on a more generous scale than that of a convict.”<sup>35</sup> Despite the condemnation of economic and social conditions in the island, the reforms recommended by the Commission were far from radical. In fact, the final recommendations echoed the moderate reform attempts made by increasing numbers of black politicians in the House of Assembly in the mid-1930s.<sup>36</sup> The commissioners suggested that the legislature finance public works projects to provide jobs, begin a housing program for the lower classes, establish a minimum wage, and appoint a Labour Officer to negotiate between workers and employers. Critically, the commissioners also supported stripping the vestries of control over sanitation, road maintenance, and public health

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<sup>33</sup> Report of the Commission appointed to The Disturbances, in Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 240.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 244-245.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>36</sup> Seekings, “Pa’s Pension,” 543.

and instead to place these responsibilities under the central government.<sup>37</sup> Rather than creating a revolutionary new program of social and economic equality, which Barbadian pan-Africanists and Payne's followers had urged, the disturbances instead worked to accelerate a set of moderate changes long advocated by the British government and Barbadian reformers. Even these restrained reforms, however, proceeded slowly in the colony, as white conservatives worked to combat change, the government faced budgetary constraints, and aspiring politicians focused on their own careers at the expense of public welfare.

Nevertheless, the report had important effects in terms of raising awareness about conditions in the island and charting a path for eventual change. In particular, by urging centralization and labor reform, the commissioners struck at the heart of local white political power in the colony. In its defense of a broad program of economic reform and social welfare legislation, the Deane Commission helped weaken white conservatives while bolstering the platform of black reformers in the Assembly. Thus, the 1937 disturbances marked the beginning of the end of white elite political power in the island, though this would take years to fully realize. Furthermore, the Deane Commission report went further than any previous commission in publicly exposing the heartless and exploitative practices that Barbadian oligarchs had long used to maintain power over black labor in the colony. The testimony given before the commissioners showed how white planters and merchants kept Barbadian labor in a state of poverty and despondency to finance their own lavish lifestyles, and turned a blind eye to the horrific social consequences of institutionalized poverty that affected most lower-class Barbadians. It was clear that white elites bore the brunt of the responsibility for the miserable conditions in the colony. However, the conditions exposed by the Deane Commission could not

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<sup>37</sup> Report of the Commission appointed to enquire into The Disturbances, in Beckles, *The Barbados Disturbances*, 266-270.

be blamed entirely upon the longstanding indifference of Barbadian authorities and elites to the suffering of the colony's poor. The miserable working and living conditions of Barbadians were also the consequences of Britain's policy of colonial self-sufficiency. The fact that colonial officials had allowed these practices to continue for so long without intervention showed how Great Britain had tragically neglected its mandate to look after the well-being of the Barbadian people.

When the Colonial Office received the final report of the Deane Commission, however, officials placed responsibility for the disturbances entirely on the shoulders of Barbadian elites rather than viewing it also as a failure of British trusteeship. Colonial officers praised the findings of the report, which several smugly interpreted as affirmation of longstanding CO criticisms of the Barbados government. Mr. Beckett, for instance, expressed his hope that the disturbances would force Barbados to change. If the Deane recommendations were carried out, he wrote, it would "mean more progress in the direction of efficient Govt. than Barbados has known in modern times."<sup>38</sup> British officials frustrated with the inertia of the Barbados government seemed to take satisfaction that local authority structures would be forced to change. Another colonial official praised the recommendation to centralize government services, and anticipated an end to the vestry system. "The Parish councils will hold up their hands in horror-but they ought to go."<sup>39</sup> Throughout CO discussions about the Barbados disturbances, there was little awareness that the British government bore any responsibility for relieving the disastrous conditions the colony. Despite the wake-up call of the riots, the CO continued its policy of colonial self-sufficiency. This laissez-faire strategy, however, would come under increasing scrutiny from anti-colonial critics in the metropole.

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<sup>38</sup> TNA, CO 28/319/8, Minute by H. Beckett, January 3, 1938.

<sup>39</sup> TNA, CO 28/319/8, Minute by A.H. Poynton, January 6, 1938.

## Radical criticism

In London, associations of West Indian intellectuals and other black colonial subjects had been growing in size and influence since the mid-1930s.<sup>40</sup> While the Ethiopian war had initially galvanized pan-African activity in the metropole, the focus of groups like the International African Service Bureau (IASB) and the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP) increasingly turned their attention to the West Indies as disturbances spread in Trinidad and Barbados during the summer of 1937. These groups had long castigated West Indian planters and local governments for the horrific conditions in the Caribbean, and continued to condemn the economic servitude and poor health and nutrition endured by black colonial workers. However, the disturbances led colonial radicals to stage an indictment of the entire British imperial system, and worked with rising West Indian nationalists to expose the failures of British trusteeship to an international audience. The LCP, for example, printed an editorial by Grantley Adams that accused imperial policies for the “deplorable state of the vast majority of the people” in the Caribbean and urged the British government to reform conditions in the region.<sup>41</sup> It was time, these publications argued, for the British Empire to fulfill its promises to subject populations.

The IASB in particular became even more vocal and drew increasing attention in London’s public spaces to colonial problems. The group staged multiple demonstrations in Trafalgar Square against the bad living and working conditions in the Caribbean. Yet, the speakers did not see West Indian riots as a purely local issue, and placed Caribbean strikes and demonstrations in within the global context of Spanish, Austrian, Czech, Chinese, and Ethiopian

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<sup>40</sup> Madera, *Black London*, chapters 2-3.

<sup>41</sup> Grantley Adams, “Labour Disturbances in the West Indies,” *The Keys* 5:3 (January-March 1938), 64.

struggles against Fascist and Nazi expansionism as well as colonialism.<sup>42</sup> Soon after the disturbances in Barbados and Trinidad, over two hundred people gathered to listen to speakers in Trafalgar Square. Addressing the crowd, George Padmore opened the meeting, calling upon black and white workers to unite against “British imperialistic exploitation.” Other speakers, like the Barbadian Chris Jones, discussed the conditions of labor in the West Indies and accused British upper classes of living in luxury “obtained through the agony of black workers.”<sup>43</sup> Linking the experiences of colonial workers to British life, black activists in London argued continually that colonial policy was inexplicably linked to metropolitan conditions.

These activities were accompanied by a vociferous propaganda and newspaper campaign in England as well as throughout the colonies.<sup>44</sup> One of the most vocal West Indian writer-activists was George Padmore, who had spoken at the IASB rally in Trafalgar Square. Padmore merged his Marxist background with pan-African thought to formulate wide-ranging critiques of imperialism. He wrote scathing editorials and books that tracked the workings of the plantation industry, the flow of capital between the Caribbean, Britain, and the United States, and the inequality this system wrought upon the region’s workers. In their literature, Padmore and other members of the IASB declared that the British government had proven itself incompetent to govern the West Indies. As the pamphlet explained, “the battle of the West Indian people, in all its daily changing phases, cannot be won in London; it must be fought and won in the West

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<sup>42</sup> Jerome Teelucksingh, “Immortal Batsman: George Padmore the Revolutionary, Writer, and Activist,” and Matthew Quest, “George Padmore’s and C.L.R. James’s *International African Opinion*,” in *George Padmore: Pan-African Revolutionary*, ed. Fitroy Baptiste and Rubert Lewis (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2009), 1-20.

<sup>43</sup> TNA, CO 318/427/11, Police report by Sergeant J. Bull, August 8, 1937. On Chris Jones, see Christian Høgsbjerg, *Mariner, Renegade and Castaway: Chris Braithwaite: Seamen’s Organiser, Socialist and Militant Pan-Africanist* (London: Redwords, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> Polsgrove, *Ending British Rule in Africa*; Christian Høgsbjerg, *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).



Indies by the people themselves.”<sup>45</sup> Padmore’s writings were disseminated throughout the Caribbean and reprinted in colonial publications, which threatened to further radicalize the already restive region.

In addition to circulating critiques of British colonialism internationally, West Indian radicals in London used their connections within the British Left to censure British policy in Parliament. Padmore, in particular, drew upon his connections with the Independent Labour Party and from his earlier work as a communist. The efforts of West Indian activists in London also found sympathetic ears within the Labour Party, in particular with the Labour MP Arthur Creech Jones. Creech Jones was a trade unionist with a longstanding interest in colonial affairs. During his tenure in the House of Commons, he became known as the “unofficial member of the Kikuyu at Westminster” for his interest in and advocacy for African colonies. Following the West Indies disturbances, Creech Jones corresponded regularly with Padmore, the Barbadian activist Peter Blackman, and other black activists in London about the severe problems facing the West Indies.<sup>46</sup> In particular, activists drew attention to the fact that conditions in the West Indies had not changed in the months since the disturbances. By early 1938, the West Indian riots became a continual topic of discussion in the House of Commons. The debates were followed closely by West Indian radical papers, in particular by the *Observer*, which also published critiques of British colonialism written by Padmore and other pan-African activists.<sup>47</sup>

In Parliament, Arthur Creech Jones took the lead in calling attention to West Indian problems, and directed his criticism at the Secretary of State for the Colonies, William Ormsby-Gore. In one debate in February, Creech Jones interrogated Ormsby-Gore about why the Colonial Office had taken so little action in the West Indies following the disturbances. Ormsby-

<sup>45</sup> BDA, Pam A 998, “The West Indies Today” (London: International African Service Bureau, 1938), 38.

<sup>46</sup> Pearce, *The Turning Point in Africa*, 83.

<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, *Barbados Observer*, January 15, 1938.

Gore repeated the Colonial Office denial of any direct responsibility for the problems, arguing that the British government had little power in the Caribbean. In particular, he claimed that he could not force the Barbadian government to enact the recommendations of the Deane Commission. As he argued, “the Barbados constitution provides for representative self-government... I have no power.”<sup>48</sup> This would become a common refrain over the following months. Colonial advocates repeatedly brought up the West Indies during debates, to which Ormsby-Gore would abdicate British responsibility in the region.

Yet, this reasoning did not abate the sustained Parliamentary criticism of the Colonial Office. In the House of Lords, Lord Sydney Olivier, who had long worked for reform in the West Indies, blamed white planters for resistance to change that would benefit black laborers.<sup>49</sup> Like anti-colonial activists, though, Olivier took his argument further and claimed that planter inaction was aided by imperial policy. He contended that it was the British government’s responsibility “to see that the welfare of the general public is not sacrificed to the interests or supposed interests of a small but influential minority.”<sup>50</sup> Olivier indicted the legacy of British imperial inaction in the region. Speaking from his experience on two different Royal Commissions to the Caribbean, he declared, “Commission after Commission has gone to the West Indies with a view to putting recommendations forward to check the economic decay, and circular after circular has been issued by the Colonial Office on housing, malnutrition and labour problems with a view to arresting social decay, and yet very little has been done.” In Barbados in particular, he argued that the Deane report showed “the stark reality of an infinite amount of illiteracy throughout the island, of attempts at land settlements which have been footling and more or less futile, of the

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<sup>48</sup> HC Deb, February 9, 1938, vol 331, col. 1053-1054.

<sup>49</sup> Francis Lee, *Fabianism and Colonialism: The Life and Political Thought of Lord Sydney Olivier* (London: Defiant, 1988).

<sup>50</sup> HC Deb, February 23, 1938, vol 107, col. 829.

dreadful lack of sanitation and wretched health, of the appalling housing conditions, the neglect of labour, the neglect to provide a protective labour code.”<sup>51</sup> The efforts of colonial radicals and Members of Parliament alike were working to expose the hypocrisy of British claims to trusteeship, a process initiated by West Indian workers in Barbados and Trinidad.

Released in February 1938, the report on the Trinidad disturbances only deepened the crisis for the Colonial Office.<sup>52</sup> The Forster Commission report caused a stir not only in Trinidad, but also in the British press and within the British government. Like the Deane Commission in Barbados, the results of the Trinidad disturbances commission pointed to the misery and poverty experienced by most Trinidadian laborers. In Parliament, the Labour Party used the Forster report to criticize Colonial Office mismanagement in the Caribbean more broadly. During the February 28 debate on the Forster report, Aneurin “Nye” Bevan, the Welsh Labour MP, declared that the disturbances in Trinidad and Barbados proved that the British Empire was mishandling its colonial possessions. The Forster Commission, he argued, proved “that our boast about this country being a good coloniser is baseless.” Bevan took the argument further by placing it within the larger global political context of the time. He said it was a good thing that the debate had not taken place two weeks previous, as no doubt “there would probably have been a highly coloured paragraph about it in Herr Hitler’s speech, because this report shows clearly what happens in the Crown Colonies of this country.”<sup>53</sup> By exposing the failures of British trusteeship, the disturbances were affecting Britain’s moral standing in an increasingly volatile stand-off with the Third Reich over former German colonies.

Parliamentary debates on the Forster Report accelerated discussion of West Indian problems in British public discourse, as British newspapers repeated the accusation that the West

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 792.

<sup>52</sup> *Trinidad and Tobago Disturbances 1937: Report of Commission*. Cmd. 5641 (London: HMSO, 1938).

<sup>53</sup> HC Deb, February 28, 1938, vol 332, col. 848-850.

Indian disturbances revealed the state of British colonial neglect and concurred with growing Labour demands for an imperial commission to travel to the Caribbean. The *Times*, for example, argued in favor of an investigation since the Barbados and Trinidad disturbances had shown “that the condition of a large number of the coloured workpeople in these regions is far from satisfactory.” Additionally, the paper placed responsibility for the region not on West Indian planters, but on the Colonial Office, “which has paid little attention to the reports of previous Commissions.”<sup>54</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* reported that the debate on the Forster recommendations “shed an ugly light on conditions in the British West Indies.” According to the publication, the disturbances over the previous year “laid bare the distressing conditions under which large sections of the West Indian population live. They have also put to a severe test the British colonial system.” The blame fell on the Colonial Office, which “has known about the facts for years” but had failed to do anything about it.<sup>55</sup> For much of the British public, who had been taught since elementary school that the “red bits” on the world map were British possessions under British protection, the aftermath of the West Indian disturbances provided a harsh lesson in the true brutality of colonialism.<sup>56</sup> As more knowledge circulated about the reality of life under British rule overseas, Colonial Office efforts to deny British responsibility and blame planter elites for the suffering of black laborers became increasingly untenable.

### **Jamaica disturbances**

As Members of Parliament debated West Indian conditions in Westminster, Caribbean laborers continued to suffer low wages, poor nutrition, and overcrowded, unsanitary living conditions. These issues were particularly pronounced in Jamaica, but the neither local state nor

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<sup>54</sup> “The Debate on Trinidad,” *The Times*, March 1, 1938, 17.

<sup>55</sup> TNA CO 318/432/5, Clipping from the *Manchester Guardian*, March 1, 1938.

<sup>56</sup> On the role of empire in British education, see Stephen Heathorn, *For Home, Country, and Race: Gender, Class, and Englishness in the Elementary School, 1880-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

employers had addressed the grievances of black laborers. On May 2, 1938, the frustrations of poor Jamaicans came to a head when 600 hungry men, women, and children marched to a sugar factory in Westmoreland to ask for higher wages. When the manager threatened to shut down rather than accede to their demands, the crowd, armed with sticks, attacked the white staff at the factory. When the police arrived, they shot into the crowd and arrested nearly 100. Over the following two months, protests, strikes, and riots spread throughout the colony.<sup>57</sup> As Padmore argued, the unrest happened because Jamaican workers were “unable to improve their conditions by peaceful means.”<sup>58</sup>

The Jamaica disturbances, which continued far longer than in Trinidad or Barbados, attracted even more British attention to the Caribbean. The London *Times*, for instance, reported that “Labour unrest has become endemic in the West Indies.” Attributing the disturbances to local governments and employers as well as “neglect by the Colonial Office,” the paper urged the new Colonial Secretary, Malcolm MacDonald, to devote his attention to the region because it “was a discredit alike to our generosity and to our intelligence.”<sup>59</sup> The riots also provided ample opportunity for Members of Parliament to continue making a case for British intervention in the region. Members urged the British government to allocate imperial aid to the West Indies for social and economic relief. Irene Ward, a Conservative MP, asked MacDonald if the Colonial Office could grant more assistance to the Caribbean in light of the problems made clear by the disturbances. She argued that “many people who are acquainted with these islands feel that over a period of years we have not taken that general interest which we ought to have taken in their welfare” and “everybody would be delighted to see their patriotic inhabitants receive more

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<sup>57</sup> Colin A. Palmer, *Freedom's Children: The 1938 Labor Rebellion and the Birth of Modern Jamaica* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>58</sup> George Padmore, “Labour Unrest in Jamaica,” *International African Opinion*, July 1938.

<sup>59</sup> “Disorder in Jamaica,” *The Times*, May 25, 1938, 17.

consideration from His Majesty's Government.”<sup>60</sup> As politicians on both the Left and Right urged action in the Caribbean, pressure on the Colonial Office mounted.

Prolonged turmoil in Jamaica demonstrated that West Indian problems would not simply cease. As Nigel Bolland has argued, the Jamaica riots “convinced the British government to think of the disturbances as a more general West Indian problem.”<sup>61</sup> As the riots continued in early June, Parliamentary debates about the West Indies grew more heated, and highlighted differing anxieties about the idea of British trusteeship. Increasing numbers of MPs accused the British government of neglecting its colonial mission in the Caribbean. In the House of Lords, Sydney Olivier read aloud from *Warning from the West Indies*, and remarked “I cannot understand how it is that no attention appears to have been given to this warning.”<sup>62</sup> He reproached the British government for neglecting the Caribbean, calling the disturbances a natural response to centuries of abuse. After recounting the numerous problems with Jamaica as well as the wider West Indies, Olivier concluded,

It appears to me now, and it has for some time, that the British Empire has reached its culmination. I think that the British Government's attitude towards Abyssinia, justly or unjustly, reasonably or unreasonably, has knocked the linch pin out of the British Empire. The linch pin was absolute confidence in the King and his representatives. You have severely damaged that confidence throughout the Empire... You have shaken the respect and confidence that the West Indies felt in England.<sup>63</sup>

According to Olivier, the Colonial Office had to respond immediately to save the West Indies from the consequences of this imperial neglect. This paternalistic approach to solving colonial problems showed that, despite the failures of colonialism, many British officials continued to believe in the concept of trusteeship and the ability of Britain to “save” its subject populations.

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<sup>60</sup> HC Deb, May 18, 1938, vol 336, col. 390-391.

<sup>61</sup> Bolland, *The Politics of Labour*, 383.

<sup>62</sup> HL Deb, June 2, 1938, vol, col. 877-880.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 895.

Not all MPs were on board with these criticisms. Predictably, the former Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Ormsby-Gore, responded to Olivier's impassioned testimony by disparaging the West Indian people. He claimed, "We must remember that in the tropics tempers are apt to get more excitable. You are dealing with an emotional—a delightfully emotional—people, and those smiles that you see everywhere when you go ordinarily among the people in a quiet time may suddenly turn to violence and rage."<sup>64</sup> Other MPs echoed Olivier's points regarding the disturbances. As Lord Strabolgi warned at the conclusion of the debate, "at this particular time we must be very careful indeed, as far as we can, that no serious charge can lie against us of neglecting or mismanaging the great heritage of the non-self-governing parts of the British Empire. We are being assailed for selfishness at the present time in interested quarters, and I am sure there is no conflict between any Party in the State on the point that we should see to it that there is no justification for any such charge."<sup>65</sup> Even for Lords uninterested in colonial welfare, the increasingly tense political situation in Europe meant that Great Britain could not afford criticism of its colonial record.

Arthur Creech Jones remained one of the most vocal critics of Colonial Office inaction. As he argued, "the Colonial Office has tended to wait on events. It has issued many circulars, with which few of us could quarrel, setting out magnificent lines of conduct and expressing excellent intentions. Once these circulars have gone there has been little energy in following them up and seeing in what degree the recommendations to the various Colonial Governments are actually put into operation."<sup>66</sup> He continued, "The truth is that until riots and disturbances occurred and we had unrest beginning to sweep from one end of our Colonial Empire to the other, very little was really being done. This burst of activity is largely due to the fact that at last the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 903.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 910.

<sup>66</sup> HC Deb, June 14, 1938, vol 337, col. 154.

workers are demanding that something should be done. It is a sad commentary on our method of government when we have to wait for riots and disturbances to force us to do what is elementary right.”<sup>67</sup> Creech Jones gave the credit for shifting British thought about the empire to Caribbean workers, who were forcing Britain to pay attention to the miserable state of its West Indian empire.

The rhetoric of former Prime Minister David Lloyd George also echoed the sense of disappointment in British trusteeship, and he used nationalistic language to make a case for greater imperial intervention. Lloyd George “felt ashamed that we should have tolerated for a very long time such a state of things under the British flag, while we were boasting of our great Empire.” The West Indies, he argued, were evidence of “a slummy empire” that would diminish British prestige in the world. In particular, he repeated British fears of damaging the relationship between the United States and Britain on the eve of war. “The West Indies are next door to them,” he claimed, “It is by the West Indies that they judge British administration. This is a good story to tell the millions of Americans, to show what the British Empire has done.” In particular, the British colonial record in the Caribbean was tainted by “the sanitary conditions there, the horrible diseases from which the people suffer, and the high percentage of the population which suffers from these horrible diseases all due to malnutrition, neglect, insanitary conditions, and to the foul shacks in which human beings are compelled to live.” Lloyd George concluded his impassioned testimony by echoing Joseph Chamberlain’s famous analogy of the British Empire as a great estate. “We are the biggest landowners in the world, and we allow our people to live in these conditions.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the riots were causing a complete reevaluation of the British colonial “mission,” both in Parliament and in the colonies.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 132-134.



The Parliamentary effort to force the British Empire to actually live up to its claim of trusteeship was echoed in the colonies by the press. Just as the Jamaica disturbances focused British attention on West Indian problems, Wynter Crawford and the *Observer* used the unrest to make claims for local reform and critique British policy. One editorial, for instance, stated that the disturbances had “brought to light the real state of affairs as obtains in these long neglected West Indian Islands” and made the case that it was therefore time for Barbadian workers to unionize.<sup>69</sup> Other articles recounted the debates taking place in Parliament. Front-page stories claimed that the disturbances had shaken “British complacency” as reports circulated of “the general low standard of living conditions among the great masses of the people, which have shocked many who always prefer to believe that things are as they should be.”<sup>70</sup> Editorials critiqued British policy, blaming “British selfishness” for the riots sweeping the West Indies. As one editorialist explained, the British government “does not appear to realise that economic distress cannot be cured by a display of warships, or that it cannot feed hungry labourers by shedding their blood. The Colonial Office will live to regret this policy.” The author warned that while West Indians were loyal people with faith in “the morality and justice” of British rule, recent events were “bound to shatter that faith.”<sup>71</sup>

Throughout the course of the 1937-1938, migrant activists in London, British politicians in Parliament, reformers in the Caribbean, and members of the press on both sides of the Atlantic pointed to the riots as evidence of the failures of British trusteeship. This diverse group of critics called upon the British government to take a greater role in the region. Yet, the motives behind calls for change were varied. Members of Parliament used the disturbances to make a case for strengthening the role of the empire in the world, to protect Britain’s reputation in international

<sup>69</sup> H.I.T., “Need Of A Workers’ Union in B’dos,” *Barbados Observer*, June 11, 1938, 1.

<sup>70</sup> “Unrest In The W. Indies,” *Barbados Observer*, June 25, 1938, 1.

<sup>71</sup> R.O. Thomas, “Revolt In The West Indies,” *Barbados Observer*, May 14, 1938, 4.

politics, and defend a paternalistic colonialism. Radical activists used the disturbances to argue for the destructiveness of colonialism and call for the liberation of people of color worldwide. In the colonies, aspiring politicians and reformers like Grantley Adams seized the opportunity to push for meaningful change as well as make a case for their leadership of the working classes. In other cases, West Indians who still believed in trusteeship demanded that the British government fulfill its promises to protect their welfare, once and for all.

### **The West India Royal Commission**

The pressure from both Parliament and colonial subjects mounted on the Colonial Office, which had also been growing concerned about the implications of continued unrest. Publicly, the new Secretary of State for the Colonies, Malcolm MacDonald, continued to repeat the Colonial Office dictum of denying responsibility for the disturbances. Yet, he and other colonial officials began working to privately outline a case for a Royal Commission as early as May 1938. Previously, the Colonial Office had resisted calls for a Caribbean-wide commission, relying instead upon the local commissions in Barbados and Trinidad. However, the Jamaica disturbances made it clear that the West Indian crisis was not going to end. As one clerk noted in the midst of the Jamaica disturbances, “Things are very clearly, and as a matter of common knowledge, not going very well in the W. Indies.” Riots were continuing, and the global prices of sugar and other exports remained depressed, which meant that the unrest would continue. The clerk, too, echoed concerns aired in Parliament about the effect of the unrest on Anglo-American relations and added to it longstanding CO fears that of increasing U.S. hegemony in the Caribbean. He wrote, “The U S A is perhaps inclined to judge British colonial administration by the specimens which it sees of it in the territories on, or adjacent to, the American continent... One sees signs of a growing interest in the administration of these territories on the part of

Americans, reflected in the American magazines. The W Indies are, to some considerable extent, the British show-window for the U S A. I am afraid it is not a very striking exhibit.”<sup>72</sup>

As a result of these fears, the Colonial Office began to urge the creation of a Royal Commission to investigate social and economic conditions in the West Indies. In mid-June, the Cabinet met at 10 Downing Street to discuss the problem of Caribbean unrest. On behalf of the Colonial Office, Malcolm MacDonald argued that a commission should be appointed to examine the problems in the West Indies, which he called “undoubtedly one of the most important in the British Empire to-day.” In making his case for a commission, MacDonald made a number of claims regarding the ideological and political importance of attending to the Caribbean that echoed those made in Parliament. The first argument focused upon implications of West Indian riots on British prestige and diplomatic relations. As he recounted the miserable social and economic conditions that marked the West Indies, he argued that “unless the matter is tackled in a larger and more comprehensive way, the efforts referred to above will prove mere temporary palliatives and the general situation will deteriorate further. And any further, steady deterioration will prove very damaging to Great Britain's reputation as a Colonial Power.” This focus on Britain’s imperial power was particularly pressing. “It is in my view imperative that, at a time when the ‘colonial question’ is being ventilated at home and abroad, we should ourselves be as far as possible above reproach.”<sup>73</sup> British neglect of the Caribbean could no longer be used as Nazi political propaganda in Germany’s own quest to pursue its colonial ambitions.

MacDonald also framed his argument in terms of winning back the loyalty of disgruntled West Indian subjects through development. In laying his case before the Cabinet, MacDonald urged a radical departure from previous colonial policy: “What is required is a long-term policy

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<sup>72</sup> TNA, CO 318/433/1, Minute by Campbell, May 23, 1938.

<sup>73</sup> TNA, CO 318/433/1, Secret Memo by the Secretary of State for the Colonies regarding the Proposed Royal Commission to enquire into the situation in the West Indies, 1938.

of reconstruction in the West Indian Colonies. This should cover a wide field and include such matters as the improvement of labour and housing conditions, and of medical services, etc.”

Rather than viewing development as a way to stimulate the British economy, this new vision of colonial trusteeship argued for projects that would benefit the colonies both economically and socially. MacDonald also made a case for the ideological value of a commission, which would “have a good psychological effect in these Colonies. It would tend to assure their people that we here are keenly interested in their affairs, and anxious to do what we can to help, and it would therefore tend to calm excited feelings there.”<sup>74</sup> In MacDonald’s view, the commission would both prevent further unrest and begin to reconstruct fractured West Indian loyalties to Great Britain.

MacDonald’s proposal signaled a radical overhaul of previous development initiatives.<sup>75</sup> While the 1929 Colonial Development and Welfare Act expected that colonies would fund their own projects, MacDonald warned that this policy could no longer stand. In order to affect meaningful reform and reconstruction in the Caribbean, the secretary declared that the British government would have to “be ready to spend more money on the West Indies than at present.” The British government could not rely on the Caribbean to supply it all, and “part would have to be found from the Mother Country. It would be disastrous to send a Royal Commission and then reject its proposals purely on financial grounds.”<sup>76</sup> MacDonald made it explicit that the unrest in the Caribbean would not end unless the British Treasury was willing to abandon colonial self-sufficiency and finance a program of reconstruction. The West Indian disturbances, and the subsequent criticisms of British colonialism, had shown that the British policy of colonial self-

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ashton and Stockwell, *Imperial Policy and Colonial Practice*, lxvii.

<sup>76</sup> TNA, CO 318/433/1, Secret Memo by the Secretary of State for the Colonies regarding the Proposed Royal Commission to enquire into the situation in the West Indies, 1938.

sufficiency was no longer tenable. Colonial rule would need to be changed, and the condition of colonial subjects improved, if the empire was going to survive. The Prime Minister agreed, conceding that Britain had to take any action necessary to rehabilitate the region. Following MacDonald's proposal, the Cabinet agreed to approve the announcement of a commission.<sup>77</sup>

When the formation of the commission was announced it brought "an outburst of joyful anticipation" in the West Indies, connected to a belief that the British Empire would "provide the necessary relief for the depression" in the colonies.<sup>78</sup> The IASB wrote an open letter to West Indian workers that circulated amongst the local press, praising Caribbean protests and "direct action" for showing the world the consequences of British imperial neglect and forcing the Colonial Office to act. The letter assured West Indian audiences that "Your sacrifice has not been in vain."<sup>79</sup> Meanwhile, the British press expressed confidence in a paternalistic trusteeship, reporting that the commission would raise West Indians "from their present condition of poverty and ignorance" through "a policy of social and economic reconstruction."<sup>80</sup> It seemed that, already, the appointment of the West India Commission was having important propaganda value, as it worked to pacify colonies, mitigate domestic criticism, and restore Britain's reputation as "a benevolent colonial power."<sup>81</sup> The Colonial Office selected a number of British experts trained in medicine, agriculture, labor relations, and economics chaired by Lord Moyne. Together, the Moyne Commission departed for the Caribbean in November 1938, in what would become one of the most sweeping knowledge-gathering efforts in British West Indian history.

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<sup>77</sup> TNA, CO 318/433/1, Extract from Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing St on June 15, 1938.

<sup>78</sup> F.A.Hoyos, *Grantley Adams and the Social Revolution* (London: MacMillan, 1974), 83.

<sup>79</sup> "An Open Letter To The Workers Of The West Indies & Br. Guiana," *Barbados Observer*, September 3, 1938, 2.

<sup>80</sup> "New Hope for the West Indies," *The Times*, June 15, 1938, 15.

<sup>81</sup> Johnson, "The Conversion of British Official Classes to the Development Idea," 69-70.

## The Moyne Commission in the Caribbean

Upon their arrival in Jamaica commissioners were met by crowds eager for the opportunity to tell British officials their stories of poverty, malnutrition, and economic struggle. Following the announcement of the commission, letters and memos flooded the Colonial Office from West Indian subjects who clamored to give their evidence in person. As the commission report would later record, in all of the West Indian colonies “the number of persons desiring to give evidence was so great that we could not find time to hear all of them.”<sup>82</sup> While the group traveled from colony to colony, gathering evidence and hearing the testimony of hundreds of West Indians, the Barbadian press followed the proceedings closely and spread awareness in the island about conditions in other colonies. The *Observer*, for instance, reported that the evidence gathered in the West Indies so far made it clear “that slavery, though abolished by law a hundred years ago, is still the dominating principle of West Indian life.” Yet, the paper predicted that the commissioners would soon find that “in no colony has this system of exploitation of labour been more ruthlessly and relentlessly practised than in this ‘ever-British’ colony of Barbados.”<sup>83</sup> Thus when the commissioners arrived in Barbados in January 1939, public attention and discourse centered on what the commissioners would think about conditions in “Little England.”

During the course of the three weeks of testimony, which were held in Bridgetown, thousands of Barbadians gathered in Queen’s Park daily to hear live broadcasts of the proceedings. Additionally, the press coverage of the Royal Commission was extensive and biting, as the level of the labor exploitation and miserable standard of living endured by most Barbadians once again became clear. During the course of the proceedings, the commissioners focused much of their attention on the immediate economic causes of the disturbances. The bleak

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<sup>82</sup> *West India Royal Commission Report*, xiii.

<sup>83</sup> “The Royal Commission,” *Barbados Observer*, January 7, 1939, 6.

evidence about Barbadian wages and living costs uncovered by the British experts was similar to the conclusions drawn by the Deane commission in late 1937.

The Moyne group also made health and sanitation central concerns of its focus. This attention to medical reform was in line with the larger idea of renovating the empire that had come to dominate British imperial policy discourse by the late 1930s. The effects of the Great Depression had been devastating to colonial economies, and social conditions declined throughout most of the colonial empire in the 1930s.<sup>84</sup> In Africa, experts on the ground in the colonies became increasingly concerned with directing agriculture and nutrition in order to address the concerns brought about by economic depression.<sup>85</sup> In the Caribbean, official discussions about the disturbances identified social welfare projects as key to preventing further unrest. Immediately following the Barbados riots, Edward Denham, the governor of Jamaica, wrote to the Colonial Office that "Social services, expenditure on Education, Health and Sanitation- are the best productive services in the long run. If a Government can be assured of the support of the women- whose interests are really the broader as they include those of their children- there is little risk of the men proceeding to extremes."<sup>86</sup> Looking beyond economic solutions, Denham used gendered development logic as a panacea for West Indian problems.

Additionally, a colonial nutrition report published in the midst of the Royal Commission investigations revealed how British officials were making increasingly overt links between welfare and colonial policy. The 1939 Committee on Nutrition in the Colonial Empire Report expressly tied nutrition and health to economic development. The report linked poor nutrition to

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<sup>84</sup> David Anderson, "Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography, and Drought: The Colonial State and Soil Conservation in East Africa during the 1930s," *African Affairs* 88:332 (1984): 321-343.

<sup>85</sup> Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert*, 178.

<sup>86</sup> TNA, CO 318/427/11, Edward Denham to Cosmo Parkinson, July 30, 1937

disease, labor inefficiency, infant mortality, and “a general lack of well-being.”<sup>87</sup> The committee proposed a solution to these problems in the colonies: “Proper feeding, proper housing, proper hygiene and proper attention to the habits and customs of the labourer: these are as important as questions relating to hours of work and rates of pay in securing a contented and efficient labour force.”<sup>88</sup> Attention to nutrition would have economic benefits by stimulating local food markets and causing “less waste of human life and effort.”<sup>89</sup> This was particularly important by 1939. West Indian protests had forced the Colonial Office to recognize the need to take a greater role in colonial affairs, but as Europe approached war, the British government would not have the resources to fully invest in the agricultural and economic needs of its colonies. Furthermore, the empire would once again need to rely on its empire during wartime, and a weak, restive colonial labor force threatened British resources in the face of the coming war. The nutrition report showed that simply improving food supplies, rather than engaging in more wide-reaching and expensive projects, could achieve colonial development and strengthen working populations. Trusteeship, then, was moving from a lofty ideal that justified imperialism to a central feature of British imperial policy.

### **Welfare and middle-class politics**

However, welfare was not simply a political tool used by colonizers to re-establish British control over the Caribbean. The riots had taught aspiring middle-class politicians the power of the working masses, and black candidates from many backgrounds framed themselves as advocates of the working class. For some candidates, appealing to the problems of the masses reflected a longstanding concern for the welfare of poor Barbadians. For others, particularly the

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<sup>87</sup> BDA, Pam A441 A, First Report of the Committee on Nutrition in the Colonial Empire (London: HMSO, 1939), 12.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 12.



former conservative Grantley Adams, emphasizing reform was a valuable tactic to gain votes and political ascendancy as the value of working-class support became apparent.<sup>90</sup> The written testimony that Adams submitted to the Moyne Commission is thus revealing. Not only does it show how he was reinventing himself as a nationalist leader, it also reflects the perspective and concerns of the many Barbadians he claimed to represent.

Adams began his testimony by criticizing the failures of trusteeship, in particular the British government's neglect of non-elite Barbadians. "It is not unfair criticism to say that rather than seem to interfere with this 'representative' system of Government the Colonial Office has too often in the opinion of the bulk of the people yielded to the clamant minority defending their 'rights,' to the neglect of the well-being of the masses." In particular, he took aim at how claims of British trusteeship were always undercut by the official policy of colonial self-sufficiency. According to Adams, Colonial Office attempts "to introduce legislation ameliorating the hard economic condition of the labouring classes" always failed because "Non-intervention is their guiding principle." The salutary neglect of the British government was no longer tenable for Barbadians. "The days when this policy was practicable have gone. A West Indian nation is in process of birth and West Indians of African origin will pay respect only where it is merited."<sup>91</sup>

British refusals to intervene on behalf of Barbadian welfare, such as when the Colonial Office had retreated from health reform in 1929, had contributed to the rise of Barbadian nationalism.

Framing himself as a spokesperson for this new nation, Adams warned of the consequences of further imperial neglect. Some radicals, like the journalist Wynter Crawford, urged the British government to remove itself from the Caribbean entirely. Inspired by the rhetoric of George Padmore and other anti-colonial activists, he declared "It is high time that this

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<sup>90</sup> Crawford, *I Speak for the People*, 52.

<sup>91</sup> TNA, CO 950/597, Memorandum of Grantley Adams to the Moyne Commission, January 16, 1939, 2.

infamous tyranny, this system of fascism better known as colonial imperialism, should be completely destroyed.”<sup>92</sup> For the most part, though, West Indian nationalism was not necessarily about gaining independence from Britain, but about claiming increasing rights and protections from the British government. The newly formed Barbados Progressive League (BPL), of which Adams was a member, urged the imperial government to intervene and take a greater role in developing the Barbadian economy. Now numbering 8,000 members, the BPL claimed to speak for the Barbadian masses that had been neglected by the British government. According to the BPL’s testimony, “The working man is in a questioning mood and is inclined to ask himself why his condition has been so long overlooked in an Empire second to none in which ideals of justice and fairplay predominate.” Using the rhetoric of British trusteeship, the BPL claimed that Barbadian workers would continue to struggle “unless the Imperial Government comes to their aid by instituting some form of planned economy.”<sup>93</sup> Most evidence submitted by Barbadian politicians and reformers to the Moyne Commission included similar demands for greater provision by the imperial state.

A focus on welfare initiatives gave middle-class leaders grounds to critique both local elites and the British government, but in a “respectable” manner, that was more likely to win votes from the black and colored middle classes. Increasingly, aspiring black politicians used the discourses of welfare to gain the loyalty of the working masses. Adams, for instance, demanded British protection for black West Indians against white elite power because “unless the Colonial Office more actively intervenes on their behalf the amelioration of their condition will be long in coming.” The ruling classes, he argued, had enacted social welfare measures only “under compulsion” and remained “singularly blind to the necessity for improvement.” Adams proposed

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<sup>92</sup> TNA, CO 950/605, Wynter Crawford to Lord Moyne, January 21, 1939.

<sup>93</sup> TNA, CO 950/598, Memorandum of the Barbados Progressive League to the Royal Commission 1939.

a broad range of social reforms, including “the re-organisation of the medical sanitary and health services; housing, labour and factory legislation, the hands of the Executive be strengthened so as to enable Governors to get the necessary Acts on the Statute Book.”<sup>94</sup> These initiatives appealed to a number of potential Barbadian voters, and demonstrate the level of state provisions demanded by Barbadians in the years following the disturbances.

A key part of the demands placed upon Great Britain centered on health reform. As David Arnold has shown for the case of India, popular disputes over public health provided colonial middle classes with a claim to speak for the body “literal and metaphorical” of the people. This self presentation, however, was also combined with a display of “their own contempt for the ignorant masses and a real fear of the violent propensities of ‘the mob.’”<sup>95</sup> Similarly, aspiring middle-class politicians in Barbados used working class riots to gain concessions from both the British and Barbadian states in pursuit of their own political goals. Adams, one of the most aspirational of these black, middle-class politicians, used health to censure the existing political system in the colony. According to him, Barbados had “preserved the primitive seventeenth-century methods of health administration which it is only necessary to see in order to condemn.” Repeating the longstanding criticisms of the health system espoused by John Hutson and others, Adams denounced parochial authorities, whom he called “a menace to public health,” and decried the existence of “a General Board of Health with no power to enforce its recommendations on parochial authorities.”<sup>96</sup>

Similarly, the BPL urged the commission to recommend changes to the system. They, too, recommended “centralising the health and sanitary services of the Colony, inasmuch as the present system deprives the Chief Medical Officer of the Colony and the General Board of

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<sup>94</sup> TNA, CO 950/597, Memorandum of Grantley Adams to the Moyne Commission, January 16, 1939, 2.

<sup>95</sup> Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, 274.

<sup>96</sup> TNA, CO 950/597, Memorandum of Grantley Adams to the Moyne Commission, January 16, 1939, 6.

Health of any effective control of public health.”<sup>97</sup> These claims were not radical ones, as they were identical to reforms that had been urged by Barbadian doctors and British administrators for decades. Yet, urging changes to the health system allowed black Barbadian politicians to frame themselves as the vanguard of change. According to this reasoning, both the British government and white elites had failed to help the working masses. Therefore, groups like the BPL and politicians like Adams should be the rightful leaders of Barbados, with the protection and support of the British government. Calls for health reform extended beyond the political claims of middle-class politicians, however. The West Indian journalist Dudley Thorpe, for instance, argued that the “medical, health and sanitary services, are scandalously deficient, and an intelligent section of the community look on the Boards, parochial and central, with deep suspicion, and believe, I fear with justice, that public funds in such hands are apt to be wasted, and public interests either neglected through incompetence, or sacrificed to private ends.”<sup>98</sup> Barbadians who had suffered for too long under a dysfunctional health system no longer trusted the local government to change it, and looked to the British government for help.

Thus when the commissioners arrived, there was both local and international pressure to investigate health conditions. During the second day of testimony, they questioned J.D. Alleyne, the acting CMO, and F.N. Grannum, the Sanitation Officer. Both officers went into extensive detail about the administration of public health in Barbados. Describing the health administration of the island, Alleyne testified that it was 150 years behind the times, calling it “wasteful and antiquated.”<sup>99</sup> Like many medical officers before him, Alleyne criticized the lack of oversight caused by this system. Lord Moyne asked what would happen, for example, if the Sanitation

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<sup>97</sup> TNA, CO 950/598, Memorandum of the Barbados Progressive League to the Royal Commission 1939.

<sup>98</sup> TNA, CO 950/606, D.D.M. Thorpe memorandum of evidence to Moyne Commission, January 22, 1939.

<sup>99</sup> TNA, CO 950/919, Testimony of J.D. Alleyne and F.N. Grannum before the Moyne Commission, January 18, 1939, 10-11.

Inspector found that anti-mosquito work was not being done in a parish. Alleyne testified that he would write to the parochial commissioners to let them know, and “They either attend to what is wrong or let it remain as it is,” but would not be compelled to make changes. R.E. Stubbs, the chairman of the proceedings in Barbados, scoffed at this process and the lack of accountability. “I suppose more often than not they do nothing? Would it be putting it unfairly if I say that this country has to thank God for the state of health of the people and not the medical profession?”<sup>100</sup> While the issues with Barbadian medical administration had been known for a long time, relaying the information before a high-profile British commission that would be broadcast both locally and internationally made the problems seem particularly pressing.

Beyond administrative problems, however, the health conditions prevalent amongst working Barbadians shocked the commissioners. Hubert Henderson, an economist, was appalled at Barbadian mortality rates. According to Henderson, “The death rate mortality figures, both the general ones and the infantile mortality rate are very much above the comparable figures of any other West Indian colony we have been to. I think they are the highest in the British West Indies.”<sup>101</sup> While the infant mortality rate had improved slowly since the First World War, it still remained much higher than most parts of the British Empire, at over 200/1000. As a Barbados medical officer recounted, “I myself, the other day, spoke to a youngish woman who had had seventeen children of whom only four were living.” The officer typically attributed part of the problem to illegitimacy and promiscuity within the lower classes: “Many of the women having unwanted child after unwanted child frequently by different men, and no means of supporting them.”<sup>102</sup> The focus on child welfare was central to the commissioners’ concern with health, as metropolitan experts wished to reform the supposed “dysfunctional culture” of black, Barbadian

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>102</sup> TNA, CO 318/444/18, Extract from a Memorandum on the West India Royal Commission 1938-1939.

working-class life.<sup>103</sup> More broadly, though, no one could deny larger structural issues that would cause a woman to lose twelve children based on preventable causes like malnutrition and poor sanitation.

The criticism of the island's poor health and sanitary structure continued when the commissioner Dr. Morgan Jones recounted his own experience of how he went to the area of Carrington Village "at the imminent risk of my life," calling the roads a "disgrace."<sup>104</sup> In Dr. John Hutson's testimony before the Commission, he complained about how "one could not go very far with the solid inertia which existed with regard to health matters" from island authorities. The system, in which parochial commissioners acted independently from one another and from centralized oversight, meant that the Barbados health system was "a question of Imperialism within Imperialism eleven times repeated."<sup>105</sup> As the bleak testimony continued, the commissioners increasingly linked better sanitary conditions to stability in the island. Hutson agreed when Morgan Jones suggested that improved housing conditions would "avoid further social unrest."<sup>106</sup> This notion would later inform the Moyne' Commission's wider recommendations about how to solve the problem of West Indian discontent.

While problems with the Barbadian public health administration put on record by the Moyne Commission once again became an indictment of elite rule in Barbados, it also made it clear how little the British government had done to step in and fulfill its mandate of trusteeship. During the following weeks, the commissioners publicly interviewed dozens of Barbadians each day to establish the economic, political, and social condition of the colony. In Barbados as well

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<sup>103</sup> "The 1938–1939 Moyne Commission in Barbados: Investigating the Status of Children," *Atlantic Studies* 11:4 (October 2014), 532.

<sup>104</sup> TNA, CO 950/919, Testimony of J.D. Alleyne and F.N. Grannum before the Moyne Commission, January 18, 1939, 18.

<sup>105</sup> TNA, CO 950/919, Testimony of John Hutson before the Moyne Commission, January 18, 1939, 29-30.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

as within the rest of the British Caribbean, the Moyne Commission would eventually put an unprecedented amount of information about the social and economic conditions of the West Indies on record. The fact that the testimony was publicly broadcast on speakers to crowds in Barbados, and reprinted in newspapers around the West Indies and Great Britain, only added to the circulation of knowledge about poor living and working conditions in the region. Crucially, the work of the Moyne Commission exposed Caribbean subjects to the deep problems with British administration and the extent of imperial neglect. In this context, it became impossible for the British government to make a convincing case that the disturbances were the fault of local governments alone. The consequences of both local white rule and British neglect had been born in dramatic ways by poor black Barbadians, who had made their frustrations with local and imperial rule known during the 1937 disturbances. The empire would have to drastically change its methods of colonial administration if it wanted to survive.

### **Effects of the Moyne Commission**

When the commissioners left Barbados in early February, commentators expressed satisfaction that meaningful change would occur. As an *Observer* editorial declared, “Lord Moyne’s Royal Commission will not inaugurate the millennium, but it is impossible to doubt that it will inaugurate a new era in the social and economic evolution of these beautiful but unfortunate isles of the sea.” A hundred years after emancipation, “we see the future big with promise of the beginning of a new and healthier social and economic order.”<sup>107</sup> Upon reading reports of the testimony in Barbados, a Grenadian journalist asserted that “There had been a ‘shake up’ in Barbados, due to the probe of the Commission, as there never had been in ‘Little England’ for two hundred years.”<sup>108</sup> The effects of this “shake up” became clear when strikes

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<sup>107</sup> “The Royal Commission And After,” *Barbados Observer*, February 4, 1939, 6.

<sup>108</sup> “As Others See Us,” *Barbados Observer*, March 18, 1939, 5.

erupted on Barbadian sugar estates soon after the commissioners left. As a memorandum on labor conditions later reflected, the strikes broke out because news circulated throughout the island that the Moyne Commissioners had recommended increased wages, which “undoubtedly had an unsettling effect” amongst already the underpaid laborers.<sup>109</sup> West Indian workers, who had endured economic servitude for so long, were impatient for change. The British government would have to step in with meaningful reform to prevent further unrest in the Caribbean.

The activities of the Moyne Commission also caused a “shake up” in how the British government understood the idea of imperial responsibility. For colonial officials, the testimony before the Moyne Commission had brought a bleak awakening. As the CO official Kenneth Blackburne remembered, it painted “a dismal, but all too true, picture of social and economic conditions; and it was crystal clear that something had to be done by Britain to raise the standards of life in this unhappy area.”<sup>110</sup> The state of the Caribbean demonstrated that “the British policy of expecting each Colony to pay its way had produced devastating results, and there was much justification for the description of the area as an ‘Imperial slum.’”<sup>111</sup> In fact, the final report of the commission revealed such a damning and dismal picture of British colonialism that the government refused to release the report of the Commission, just the recommendations. The report was finished months after the outbreak of the Second World War, and the British government could not afford to let the breadth of the exhaustive volume become public. According to the War Cabinet, “the passages describing bad social conditions in the West Indies, coming with the authority of a unanimous Royal Commission, would be used with deadly effect by German propoganda machine in America and other neutral countries, and so embarrass our

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<sup>109</sup> TNA, CO 1042/289, Memorandum, October 27, 1945.

<sup>110</sup> Blackburne, *Lasting Legacy*, 42.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-77.



war effort.”<sup>112</sup> Therefore, only the recommendations of the commission were made publicly available.

When published in February 1940, the Moyne Commission’s final recommendations called for the same economic and labor reforms to address the grievances of West Indian previously expressed by the commissions set up following the Barbados and Trinidad disturbances. Its original contribution, however, was its call for the allocation of significant amounts of British money to fund a long-standing development program in the West Indies. Ranging from improvements from health care to education, the recommendations reinforced the need to stabilize and pacify West Indians as the only way to achieve lasting peace in the troubled region. According to the commissioners, there was “a pressing need for large expenditure on social services and development which not even the least poor of the West Indian Colonies can hope to undertake from their own resources.”<sup>113</sup> The Moyne Commission recommendations made a convincing and incontrovertible case for the rest of the British government that the longstanding British policy of colonial self-sufficiency was no longer plausible if the empire was to endure.

### **Conclusion: The Colonial Development and Welfare Act**

Before the recommendations were published, the Colonial Office had begun to reconsider how administered the empire.<sup>114</sup> As colonial disturbances spread throughout the 1930s and criticism of British imperialism mounted, clerks and administrators within the Colonial Office slowly began to reevaluate existing policies. Some of the key actors facilitating these changes were the experts and advisors enlisted by the Colonial Office since the 1920s. Doctors,

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<sup>112</sup> TNA, CO 318/439/8, Cipher telegram from Secretary of State for the Colonies to Officers Administering the Governments of Barbados, et al, January 30, 1940.

<sup>113</sup> *West India Royal Commission 1938-1939 Recommendations* (London: HMSO, 1940), 9.

<sup>114</sup> Johnson, “The West Indies and the Conversion of British Official Classes to the Development Idea,” 55-83.

agricultural experts, and labor advisors worked to bring concerns of local officers to London and circulated colonial knowledge within the British government. Increasingly, administrators like Malcolm MacDonald came to believe in the more paternalistic, state-directed approach to colonial development promoted by these experts rather than the strictly advisory role traditionally embraced by the British government.<sup>115</sup> The timing of this transformation is remarkable, as discussions about a new empire-wide colonial development policy had begun just prior to Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939. In the midst of such a crisis, it hardly seemed possible to engineer a massive revision in Britain's fiscal responsibility to the empire. Indeed, the British Treasury remained as reticent as ever to fund expensive projects in the colonies.

Yet, during a number of heated negotiations over the course of the following months, MacDonald was able to successfully convince the Treasury that an unprecedented commitment to colonial welfare was necessary even during wartime. He argued that colonial stability was more important now than ever, as British military resources could hardly be diverted by colonial revolts in the midst of a world war. Further, recognizing that there would be international pressure placed upon Britain to decolonize after the conflict was over, he made the case that if Britain hoped to keep its empire, the government had to demonstrate its capability for trusteeship immediately. Finally, MacDonald impressed upon the Treasury the importance of having a response ready once the Moyne Commission recommendations were made available to the public. Ignoring the report would be disastrous, as the already maligned British Empire could not suffer yet another charge of imperial neglect and mismanagement.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert*, 5-16

<sup>116</sup> Constantine, *The Making of British Colonial Development Policy*, 246-251.

When the Moyne Commission recommendations were published, it provided the final proof required by the Colonial Office to convince the wider British government of the need for drastic change.<sup>117</sup> The Colonial Development and Welfare Act (CDWA) of 1940 exemplified a drastic new policy and vision for British imperialism. It was presented to the House of Commons in May 1940, two years after the Jamaica disturbances made it apparent that the policy of colonial self-sufficiency was untenable. The CDWA committed £20 million from the British treasury over two decades for the sole purpose of development and reconstruction in the Caribbean, both as a method to pacify restive colonial peoples as well as a way to maintain the British Empire during and after the war. Just eleven days after Nazi troops invaded France, Malcolm MacDonald testified before Parliament about his faith in the ultimate victory of Britain over Germany and the continuation of the British Empire. According to MacDonald, “When the enemy is worsted and the war is finished, Britain will still exercise vast responsibilities for the government of Colonial peoples.”<sup>118</sup> This new responsibility for colonial people was social welfare, rather than just economic initiatives. As MacDonald continued, the idea of “development” included not only “the material economic resources of a territory, but it also covers everything which ministers to the physical, mental or moral development of the colonial peoples of whom we are the trustees.”<sup>119</sup> British officials had come to understand that colonial development included an investment in education, health, and sanitation reforms, and the Colonial Office overtly worked to use social welfare to legitimate imperialism.<sup>120</sup> Trusteeship had evolved from a vague justification for empire to a concrete policy that would attempt to hold it together.

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<sup>117</sup> Howard Johnson, “The Political Uses of Commissions of Enquiry (1): The Imperial-Colonial West Indies Context The Forster and Moyne Commissions,” *Social and Economic Studies* 27:3 (1978): 256-283.

<sup>118</sup> HC Deb, May 21, 1940, vol 361, col. 42.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>120</sup> Manderson, *Sickness and the State*, 241.

This new direction in imperial policy found favor from most British politicians, as both the Conservative and Labour parties supported the bill. For pro-empire Tories, alleviating criticism of British policy was central to their support for the CDWA. According to Conservative MP Jocelyn Lucas, the bill “gives us another opportunity of refuting the accusations of our enemies that we won the Empire by rape and that we play the part of the dog-in-the-manger.” Pursuing development policies that benefited colonial subjects allowed British imperialists to uphold the myth that in the British Empire, “Every man, of every creed and of every colour, is a free and independent citizen.”<sup>121</sup> For the Labour Party, the bill was the culmination of leftist efforts towards a more interventionist colonial policy since the mid-1930s. Arthur Creech Jones, praising the bill, stated that it marked “the ending of the laissez faire attitude towards Colonial development and, I hope, the end of platitudinous talk about trusteeship.”<sup>122</sup> The act, which outlined a massive program for British paternalism in the colonies, pleased members of the British Left who preferred to see the British Empire as a benevolent, moral force for good in the world. Despite the massive financial commitment required by the bill, the CDWA passed through Parliament easily during the summer of 1940. In the midst of war, British colonial rule was “undergoing renovation.”<sup>123</sup>

The passage of the CDWA also presaged a new vision of empire amongst the British public, which became central to British self-imagining during the war. In Wendy Webster’s terminology, during World War II the colonies came to comprise a “people’s empire” in metropolitan culture, connected to the metropole through “welfare and partnership”.<sup>124</sup> In British popular opinion, the focus on colonial development, and “improving” the lives of colonial

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<sup>121</sup> HC Deb, May 21, 1940, vol 361, col. 51.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., col. 55.

<sup>123</sup> Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the End of Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 33.

<sup>124</sup> Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire 1939-1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 53.

subjects through sacrificial grants, separated the good, kind British Empire from the aggression and violence of the Nazis. In many ways, then, the passage of the CDWA was transformative. As CO official Kenneth Blackburne characterized it, “For the first time Britain had accepted full responsibility for the improvement of economic and social conditions in her colonies; and for the first time the Colonial Office was able to back up its advice to colonial governments with money.”<sup>125</sup> This indeed was one of the major changes ushered in by the CDWA. Throughout the history of health development in Barbados alone, the CO had urged the Barbadian government to improve medical services, but never supplied the funds to help them do so. For the first time, the CDWA promised to provide monetary backing to this relationship, not only for the Caribbean, but for the entire empire. This marked a fundamental change in British understandings of the responsibility of the state to its citizens and subjects.

The West Indian labor revolts had demonstrated that if Britain wished to keep its empire, it actually had to improve the lives of the people it ruled, rather than simply promise to do so. The protests of West Indians, both in the Caribbean and in London, had facilitated one of the most sweeping changes in British imperial history. Yet, the British government had run out of time to pass meaningful reform. The disturbances and the resulting commissions had already begun the process of decolonizing the Caribbean. The failures of British imperialism had been put on record, and this knowledge provided the space for aspiring West Indian nationalists to make convincing claims for an increased role in colonial governance. Additionally, with the passage of the CDWA came rising expectations amongst Caribbean subjects of the rights and privileges that would be given to them by the government moving forward. For the late imperial state, these demands would eventually become too much to bear.

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<sup>125</sup> Blackburne, *Lasting Legacy*, 50.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion: “A failure in Empire building”

#### The Colonial Development and Welfare Act in practice

Despite the great hopes of 1940, the Colonial Development and Welfare Act could not be implemented right away. The legislation was not meant to give immediate assistance, but rather to build long-term development projects and investments. Indeed, colonial governments would have to apply for funds under the CDWA that would take time to approve. In the West Indies, there was widespread disappointment that prompt relief would not be brought after so many years of waiting. In early 1941, C.Y. Carstairs, the Assistant Secretary for the Moyne Commission, warned the British Treasury that “throughout the West Indies there is a rising tide of unemployment and under employment with all its concomitants of destitution, malnutrition and the danger of political unrest.” If there was a disturbance, he argued, “we might find ourselves obliged to accept the assistance of United States armed forces, with deplorable consequences for public opinion and not only in the West Indies.”<sup>1</sup> Wartime food shortages were particularly devastating. In mid-1942, Governor Bushe wrote an urgent letter to the CO, warning that food and fuel shortages in the island meant that “the greater part of the population are suffering and a large part are on the verge of starvation.” Like other governors, he was frustrated with the slow pace of change, and was adamant that Parliament would have to alter the Barbadian constitution when the war was over, “or stand on the place as a failure in Empire

<sup>1</sup> TNA, CO 318/443/7, C.Y. Carstairs to Mr. Davidge, January 24, 1941.

building.”<sup>2</sup> The radical Barbadian journalist and now House of Assembly member, Wynter Crawford, had been an admirer of the Moyne Commission and the CDWA. However, he complained that both the British and local governments did not implement many reforms. During his first few years in the Assembly, he would raise “some of the recommendations of the Moyne Commission, but to no avail.”<sup>3</sup> The slow implementation of the act only further disappointed West Indians who had found their belief in British trusteeship to be misplaced for too many years.

Yet, the ideological consequences of the act, as well as the continued fallout from the disturbances, were having a real effect on local politics in Barbados. During each election year following the 1937 disorders, more and more white conservatives lost their seats in the House of Assembly. Crawford was just one of many new black Assembly members during the war years, as aspiring black politicians continued to frame themselves as the true reformers and defenders of working Barbadians. Following his election in 1942, for instance, the black progressive politician J.T.C. Ramsay entered the House of Assembly chamber in a pair of overalls to show his representation of laborers.<sup>4</sup> The alliance between middle class politicians and labor leaders, and the formation of the first political parties in Barbados, caused great social conflict. In his monthly dispatch to the Colonial Office in June 1943, Governor Grattan Bushe explained that “certain members of the white community” were hostile “towards the aspirations of the politically aggressive section of the Legislature as well as towards measures of social amelioration.” To illustrate the point, he attached letters read in censorship from Mrs. G. Skinner, a white Barbadian, whose views were “near enough to those of a far from negligible number of persons in Barbados to make them worthy of note.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> TNA, CO 28/327/13, G. Bushe to Downie, June 23, 1942.

<sup>3</sup> Crawford, *I Speak for the People*, 115.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> TNA, CO 28/327/14, Bushe to Oliver Stanley, June 12, 1943

In her letter, G. Skinner blamed the British government for helping black Barbadians to take political power. As Skinner state, “I, and others like me feel in despair at seeing our island calmly handed by the Colonial Government to the Africans in this Colony, Africans who have barely shaken the mud of the fields from their feet.” While the electoral changes that had been transforming the colony came from grassroots political organization, sectors of the white community tended to blame the British government for empowering black Barbadians. As Skinner continued, “the present Colonial policy” had caused black Barbadians to be “rushed literally from the fields to equality with the white man.” In her mind, the Moyne Commission had taught black Barbadians “that the British Government is so afraid of them that it has to do all they demand.”<sup>6</sup> Her criticisms of the British government were scathing: “It is all very well for white people safe in their white country, with flowing words and a magnificent gesture of democracy, to sweep away the Colour bar and decide for us that the dear Africans shall be our brothers and associates.” But, she wondered, how would white Britons react if they lived in Barbados? She wrote, “Would they sit by and rejoice to see their young white daughters dancing cheek to cheek with a wooly-haired coloured boy? Would they rejoice to see their sons marry a chocolate-coloured African girl and bring that abomination, that little Half-cast into the world?”<sup>7</sup> While most white Barbadians would never publicly espouse the ugly sentiments expressed by Skinner, the fears in the white community unleashed by the electoral changes were very real.

Blaming the CDWA for black political activity was ridiculous, as the Act meant to provide paternalistic welfare services to pacify West Indian workers, not enfranchise them. Yet, rather than believing that black Barbadians were capable of organizing political support and

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<sup>6</sup> TNA, CO 28/327/14, Letter from Mrs. G. Skinner to Oliver Stanley, February 7, 1943, Enclosure in Despatch, Bushe to Oliver Stanley, June 12, 1943.

<sup>7</sup> TNA, CO 28/327/14, Letter from Mrs. G. Skinner to the Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, May 12, 1943, Enclosure in Despatch, Bushe to Oliver Stanley, June 12, 1943.



defeating the white establishment on their own, elite white Barbadians continued to blame colonial policy for dwindling white political power in the colony. According to Bushe, during a 1943 Legislative Council debate over the bill to amend the Representation of the People Act, J.D. Chandler made “some provocative remarks in relation to the influence of 'Downing Street' in regard to Colonial policy.” He stated that the “bureaucratic Government in Downing Street” was “inserting of the thin edge of the wedge and the day will come-- rather soon I fear-- when Downing Street will say 'now you people in Barbados are hopelessly insolvent; your Legislature is not able to run the country and we propose to take you over.’” According to the governor, Chandler's views “give expression to a suspicion which does undoubtedly exist, that in proffering assistance to the Colonies under the Colonial Development and Welfare Act, His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom has been actuated by ulterior motives.” Chandler's remarks “found an echo” in other parts of Barbados-- it was reported that at a meeting in St. Andrew on July 22, a schoolmaster said “we are not prepared to stay here and allow Downing Street to make laws and push them down our throats.”<sup>8</sup> No longer were white Barbadians claiming an attachment to English identity. The Colonial Development and Welfare Act had made them firmly Barbadian, an embattled minority caught between British autocrats in London and a black majority at home.

The old rhetorical tactic of making dire predictions of a British takeover no longer protected white political power after years of black political mobilization. The franchise was eventually expanded in the summer of 1943, and for the first time, women qualified to vote in Barbados. While the electorate swelled by 510 percent, continued income qualifications still kept the number of voters restricted. Yet, the enlarged electorate meant that subsequent elections saw the final downfall of white conservative Assembly members. Eventually, full adult suffrage was

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<sup>8</sup> TNA, CO 28/327/14, Bushe to Stanley, August 12, 1943

granted in 1950, and the fears of white elites were realized.<sup>9</sup> However, while white planters lost political power in the years following the disturbances, the moderation of the labor movement under Grantley Adams and the slow rate of electoral change ensured that Barbadian elites maintained their economic dominance in the colony. Black politicians gained authority over the Barbadian government, but because of the historic land and business monopolies of white Barbadians, economic power remained in the hands of white planters and merchants. Additionally, the co-option of the labor movement by middle class reformers after the disturbances pushed out more radical calls for the nationalization of the sugar industry or initiatives that would redistribute wealth. For these reasons, black political elites in Barbados have tended to remain focused on protecting their political positions instead of challenging the white establishment.<sup>10</sup>

### **Health after the CDWA**

The Moyne Commission's great attention to health, and the emphasis of the CDWA on welfare programs, made it seem that health and sanitary conditions would improve steadily with the help of imperial funds. Yet, as with other welfare reforms, changing the health conditions and administration of the colony proceeded slowly. In many ways, conditions in Barbados remained the same as during the early 1920s. For instance, when a 1943 Barbadian committee to investigate housing and sanitation in the island was appointed by the governor, it found that the horrific conditions that had characterized Barbadian housing had changed little. The poor still lacked toilet facilities, with country houses containing an outside "open pit closet" shared with a neighbor while in town, many families simply used pails which were emptied into the sea. Most

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<sup>9</sup> Beckles, *Chattel House Blues*, 32-39.

<sup>10</sup> Linden Lewis, "The Contestation of Race in Barbadian Society and the Camouflage of Conservatism," in *New Caribbean Thought: A Reader*, ed. Brian Meeks and Folke Lindahl (Mona, Jamaica: The University of West Indies Press, 2001).

houses for the poor consisted of two small rooms, and in many cases, numerous children were packed into these tiny quarters. The committee found, for example, a family with two adults and nine children in a two-roomed house.<sup>11</sup> The committee concluded that “The picture is a depressing one” and would be too big for the colony to handle with its own resources.<sup>12</sup>

The Colonial Development and Welfare Act was designed precisely to fund such colonial welfare projects. Yet, the development legislation did little to address or alter the actual local conditions of Barbados. By 1944, the British government had spent just £2,896,456 on colonial development.<sup>13</sup> While this sum superseded any past spending on colonial aid, it fell far short of the expenditure allowed in the act. The British Treasury, reluctant to expend precious resources on the colonies during wartime, limited the amount of government spending on imperial affairs. Furthermore, the British officials who oversaw the development programs in the Caribbean tended to ignore the structural causes of poverty and inequality in the Caribbean, focusing instead on correcting perceived West Indian cultural deficiencies. For instance, Frank Stockdale, the Comptroller for Development who was stationed in Barbados, attributed economic stagnation to the laziness of tropical workers and the presence of female-headed households.<sup>14</sup> Overall, as Darcy Hughes Heuring notes, “Bureaucratic and administrative difficulties delayed processing, and there was a war to fight... the British government was fundamentally unable to maintain its commitment to the Colonial Development and Welfare Act.”<sup>15</sup> Despite the unprecedented nature of the 1940 Colonial Development and Welfare Act, and the fact that the West Indies received

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<sup>11</sup> BDA, Pam B 3, “Housing in Barbados Report,” August 1943, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> Constantine, *The Making of British Colonial Development Policy*, 258

<sup>14</sup> Chamberlain, *Empire and Nation-Building in the Caribbean*, 64.

<sup>15</sup> Heuring, “Health and the Politics of ‘Improvement’ in Jamaica,” 95.

more aid than any other part of the empire during the war, “little was achieved in the region by 1945.”<sup>16</sup>

The legislation faced other problems in addition to Treasury limitations and administrative dysfunction. Under the terms of the act, colonial governments had to apply for funds before improvements could begin. In Barbados, although electoral change was underway, white conservatives still had power in the Legislative Council and House of Assembly. White elites in particular viewed the act, and the new development administrators who were stationed in Barbados, with suspicion. At the same time, newly elected reform candidates from the black middle classes became mired in internecine conflicts within the labor movement and focused more on protecting their new positions in the government than pushing for immediate change. Proposals for development projects from the Barbados government, then, took time to materialize. The CDWA sent a number of experts traveled to the colony during the war, including a TB specialist, a nutritionist, a professor who did blood tests, and an official from the Rockefeller Malarial Unit in Trinidad.<sup>17</sup> But, the legislation could not force the Barbados government to accept expert advice. Even though the CDWA could grant funds to a colony, it did not have the authority to override constitutions. This meant that development officials had to deal with the existing infrastructure in Barbados. In the case of health reform, the same problems that had plagued the Barbadian public health administration for decades made meaningful change impossible.

The new CMO, H.D. Weatherhead, found this to be the case when he arrived in Barbados in 1944. Like many before him, Weatherhead lamented that most causes of death in the island were from preventable diseases like typhoid and tetanus, and were caused by unsanitary

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<sup>16</sup> Howard Johnson, “The British Caribbean from Demobilization to Constitutional Decolonization,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 4, *The Twentieth Century*, 611-12.

<sup>17</sup> BDA, SRL 12, Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 1944-45, 5

conditions. Yet, under the present system it was impossible to alleviate change public health and sanitation. As Weatherhead concluded, “until reorganisation takes place this appalling wastage of life and intense human suffering will continue.”<sup>18</sup> In a scathing memo, he echoed again the complaints of previous officers: the CMO had no executive authority, the health administration was fragmented and divided, and parish medical authorities were often untrained laymen. These factors meant that Barbados continued to have an infant mortality rate “nearly double the other West Indian Colonies.” This, he wrote, was “just a wicked waste of human lives.”<sup>19</sup> Weatherhead energetically lobbied the government to allow reform, but by the end of the war, the Barbados health administration still suffered from many of the same problems that John Hutson had identified in 1908.

It appeared that Weatherhead would continue the same fruitless labor undertaken by previous CMOs in Barbados, and stand by as infants perished from dysentery because the vestries refused to spend tax dollars on sanitation. Yet, in 1947, the medical officer reported that progress had finally been made in reorganizing the health and medical services of the island. “A crystallisation of public opinion was noticeable during the time mentioned above and the Government were quick to press forward with the preparation of the much needed legislation for early representation to the Legislature.”<sup>20</sup> The effects of franchise expansion were having an effect on government policy, as Barbadian voters made demands for meaningful change in the health system. In 1948, the legislature passed acts to reorganize the public health administration, strengthen the CMO position, and alter the administration of sanitation by parochial boards.<sup>21</sup>

The Department of Medical Services Act was finally proclaimed in 1950, officially reorganizing

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>19</sup> BDA, Pam C 194, “Memorandum on the Medical Services of Barbados and Proposals for Reorganization by Chief Medical Officer H.D. Weatherhead,” April 12, 1945, 2.

<sup>20</sup> BDA, SRL 12, Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer 1946-47, 6-14.

<sup>21</sup> BDA, SRL 12, Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer 1947-48, 6-12.

the health administration of the island, and further reforms would be implemented later in the decade.<sup>22</sup> Yet, these changes did not occur because of a British government directive or colonial development legislation. Instead, a newly expanded electorate pushed through reforms that had been long desired by working and middle class Barbadians, but quashed by an elite, conservative House of Assembly two decades before. In the end, it was public opinion and electoral change that ultimately led to reform, not policies handed down from above.

### **Development between Britain and Barbados**

In 1895, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, famously declared that it was “not enough to occupy certain great spaces of the world’s surface unless you are willing to develop them. We are the landlords of a great estate; it is the duty of the landlord to develop his estate.”<sup>23</sup> During the period between the two world wars, the Colonial Office, in conjunction with metropolitan and colonial medical experts, followed Chamberlain’s call and made a number of piecemeal attempts to develop the vast British imperial estate in the face of mounting criticism of colonial rule. Yet, as this dissertation has argued, the very policies meant to save the struggling empire instead contributed to its unraveling.

Following the rise of pan-Africanism and the spread of other radical ideologies during the First World War, British authorities feared anti-colonial revolts in the Caribbean. Colonial officials came to believe that alleviating the daily misery faced by West Indian workers would ameliorate the grievances of newly restive colonial subjects and foster continued imperial loyalty. This view, combined with a renewed focus on the idea of colonial trusteeship during the interwar period, prompted authorities in London to implement a number of initiatives to improve the health, nutrition, and sanitation of colonial subjects in the Caribbean as well as in other restless

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<sup>22</sup> BDA, SRL 12, Annual Report of the Director of Medical Services, 1950-51.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in M. Cowen and R.W. Shenton, *Doctrines of Development* (London: Routledge, 1996), 257.

territories of the empire. Yet development policies, as implemented in the post-World War I years, were constrained by the British policy of colonial self-sufficiency, which expected colonial governments to pay for their own maintenance. When imperial authorities attempted to improve health conditions in the island of Barbados, a colony with the highest infant mortality rate in the British Empire, they did so by sending stern dispatches recommending reform and pressuring British governors to persuade local lawmakers to implement changes. All of this came without imperial financial support, and the Barbadian government was left with almost complete leeway when it came to accepting British directives.

The ensuing disputes over health and sanitation in Barbados would have enormous consequences both for local rule in Barbados, and for the relationship between the British government and its Barbadian subjects. The 1925 Public Health Commission proposed relatively minor reforms to the public health administration of Barbados, yet led to great conflict between the Colonial Office and white Barbadian elites. The imperial and local governments held opposite views of the best way to control black Barbadian workers. The Colonial Office believed that improved health and living conditions would pacify Barbadian laborers radicalized by the experience of war and the influence of pan-African ideology, while white Barbadian elites believed that loosening their grip on vestry governance and granting concessions for black Barbadian welfare would undercut elite power in the colony. Furthermore, the high population density of Barbados ensured a steady, surplus labor supply. Without the need to foster and protect a productive labor force, the planter and merchant oligarchy remained largely indifferent to the health and welfare of the working population. The ensuing clashes that occurred between British administrators and white creole elites over how to manage black bodies exposed the

fragility of British rule over the colony, as white Barbadian planters and merchants used claims of Englishness to resist imperial directives and protect their hegemony over local affairs.

While the House of Assembly had long refused to implement reforms that would benefit non-elite Barbadians, the experience of war and the circulation of radical political ideas had contributed to a political awakening amongst some sectors of Barbadian society during the 1920s. As the Democratic League identified and mobilized new black voters and the Universal Negro Improvement Association impressed upon its members the value and dignity of black lives, the stubbornness of white legislators to accept reform that would benefit black workers was thrown into harsh relief. When thousands of poor, black Barbadians lost their lives in malaria epidemics due to the unorganized and uninformed response of the Barbados public health administration, it made white elite callousness to black suffering even more apparent. Black Barbadians, who stated their allegiance to the British crown and believed in Britain's promises of colonial protection and trusteeship, looked to the imperial government to intercede on their behalf. Yet, the Colonial Office took no action. Despite the suffering of black Barbadians, and the desire of British officials to improve health conditions in order to prevent unrest, the policy of colonial self-sufficiency and an inclination to protect white rule in Barbados meant that British administrators would never supersede the Barbadian constitution.

Eventually, this strategy would backfire. The struggles over public health contributed to a growing belief amongst many poor Barbadians that no one would come to their aid. By the late 1930s, British postwar fears of West Indian revolt came to fruition as labor unrest swept the Caribbean. In both the urban and rural spaces of Barbados, members of the Barbadian working classes revolted against the conditions that kept them poor, desperate, and sick. The conflicts, as many have shown, had their roots in the severe economic problems that marked Barbadian and



Caribbean life more broadly.<sup>24</sup> Yet, as this dissertation has argued, the disturbances were also due to the broken promises of British trusteeship. Barbadian workers, long ensconced in British culture and firmly attached to the idea that Queen Victoria freed their ancestors from slavery, believed in the promises of British trusteeship for subject peoples. However, repeated instances of British neglect, such as the refusal of the Colonial Office to override white elite resistance to health reforms that would benefit black workers, meant that many poor Barbadians had lost faith in the willingness of the British government to help during the throes of the Great Depression. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, and Britain's refusal to intercede, only reinforced the belief that the British Empire would never intervene on the behalf of black subjects. Conflicts over health reform in Barbados were thus related to a wider crisis regarding British imperial legitimacy in the eyes of West Indian workers.

The result of the disturbances in Barbados and the wider Caribbean was to force the British Empire to reevaluate its policy towards the colonies. British commissions set up to investigate events in Barbados and Trinidad articulated the needs for economic, political, and social reforms in the Caribbean, and the British Moyne Commission, which visited the West Indies following the disturbances, made recommendations largely based on the knowledge produced in the earlier commissions.<sup>25</sup> These investigations put a vast amount of information on record, and broadcast the failures of British colonialism both to West Indian subjects as well as to the wider world. However, Barbadian dissatisfaction with British rule did not result in a move for independence. Indeed, even the pan-African critiques of empire that circulated between Europe and the Western Hemisphere, and inspired the West Indian workers who revolted, were not always focused on forming independent nation-states. Most African and Caribbean activists

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<sup>24</sup> Bolland, *On the March*; Belle, "The Struggle for Political Democracy: the 1937 Riots."

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, "The West Indies and the Conversion of the British Official Classes to the Development Idea"; "The British Caribbean from Demobilization to Constitutional Decolonization."

in London, for instance, “sought a radical transcending of empire, not a complete severing of ties with it.”<sup>26</sup> In Barbados, critiques of British imperialism were not about seeking independence from British rule, but about allowing Barbadians to access the promised benefits of imperial trusteeship. Following the disturbances, middle class politicians used discourses of welfare and trusteeship to make a case for their political aspirations and leadership of the colony, and push out aspiring radical activists who desired more wide-ranging reform. The disturbances, and the commissions that followed, had created the space for Barbadian nationalist claims for wider inclusion into imperial citizenship, greater provision for welfare services, and addressing systemic inequality.

On the surface, it appeared that the British Empire was willing to recognize these claims. The actions of West Indian workers had caused the British government to make welfare, health, and development key aspects of formal British policy. The 1940 Colonial Development and Welfare Act, which resulted from the West Indian disturbances and the recommendations of the Moyne Commission, provided material backing for the promise of colonial trusteeship as it committed British funds to colonial reconstruction for the first time. However, the new welfare program was not based on the idea of political rights or enfranchisement for the colonized.<sup>27</sup> Instead, the old Chamberlain doctrine that linked colonial development to economic benefit for Britain “had been substantially redefined by a new liberal, paternalist agenda, which looked to state intervention to deal with the problems of growing rural-urban migration, unemployment, and loss of productive resources” in the colonies.<sup>28</sup> The new development program, then, meant to “rescue” subject populations from their misery and thus justify the continuation of a “benevolent” British Empire.

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<sup>26</sup> Matera, *Black London*, 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> Jeremy Seekings, “‘Pa’s Pension,’” 544.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert*, 16.

For colonial people, though, the events of the late 1930s led to far different conclusions. As Mary Chamberlain has argued, by the late 1930s “both West Indians and their metropolitan masters were engaged simultaneously in nation-building projects, albeit with widely different resources and competing agendas.”<sup>29</sup> For British administrators, development policies meant to rebuild and restore an imperial estate that could not be broken. For Barbadian subjects, reform attempts should lead ultimately to greater political representation for non-elite subjects and wider provision of social services by the state. These competing aims, while similar in rhetoric, were incompatible in practice.

The problem of the “third British Empire” for colonial authorities was that it was a period in which colonial subjects began to make increasing claims for their equality and representative government. This meant that the tensions that had long characterized colonialism—the ongoing dance between inclusion and exclusion, incorporation and difference—were no longer tenable. West Indians increasingly came to see themselves as deserving the rights and privileges of citizenship, and to them, the passage of the CDWA appeared to codify these rights. In many ways, then, the act had the seeds of decolonization sown within it. As Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper have argued, “Britain could not escape the problem of preserving empire when the very terms by which the imperial state was trying to relegitimize itself—development and political participation—were producing cascades of demands for social and economic resources.”<sup>30</sup> As World War II drew to a close, Barbadian subjects made increasing claims for equality, representation, and a better quality of life.

During the immediate post-World War II era, the British government continued its commitment to colonial development, dramatically increasing its financial pledges to the

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<sup>29</sup> Mary Chamberlain, *Empire and Nation-Building*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 423.

colonies with further legislation in 1945 and 1950. Yet as greater numbers of West Indians gained the right to vote and governments became more representative, the dramatic political transformations underway in the region undermined the efforts of the British government to draw the Caribbean into its orbit of protective, paternalistic trusteeship. When reforms occurred, they did so because due to the activism and assent of West Indian people, rather than British direction and patronage. In the years following the passage of the Colonial Development and Welfare Act, it became clear that the British Empire would not be able to “afford the costs of staying whole.”<sup>31</sup> By the 1950s, the imperial government began its slow retreat from the Caribbean.

The CDWA, like many colonial policies before and after it, had intersected with local circumstances in unexpected ways, with unintended consequences. In Barbados, white elites blamed the British government for their dwindling political power, while the advisors sent to Barbados under the auspices of the CDWA found it difficult to implement meaningful reforms. Furthermore, as the consequences of the disturbances and a stated commitment to development led colonial subjects to make increasing claims on the British government for economic and social services, the financial cost of keeping the empire together would become unsustainable. Yet, even as Britain retreated from the region, the logic of late colonialism would become replicated and ingrained in West Indian nationalism. As Barbadians and other Caribbean subjects formed first a West Indies Federation, and then independent nation-states, development became part of the process of independence. The legacy of debates over health and welfare was reflected in the policies of Errol Barrow, the first prime minister of an independent Barbados in 1966. Barrow’s government instituted a broad program of state-sponsored services and reform. Education was free for all Barbadian students from primary school to university, Barbadians

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<sup>31</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 202.

were entitled to Social Security, and a universal healthcare system ensured that everyone had access to medical care and treatment. The emphasis on reform and welfare that characterized late colonial policy had become central to imaginings of the Barbadian nation, but were in the end provided by West Indians themselves, not the British Empire.

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