

Chapter 1

Introduction

JAMAICA IS a small island situated off the southern tip of the Florida peninsula in North America. Located at 17° to 18° north latitude and 76° to 78° west longitude, it is about 4,000 nautical miles from London but just 1,500 miles from New York and 1,100 from New Orleans. Because of its proximity to the United States a strong pull has long been felt in Jamaica from its continental neighbor; and indeed, though the political, economic, and cultural predilections of the ruling classes in Jamaica were riveted upon Britain during the colonial past, the countervailing influence of the United States was always seductive. By 1900 the island found itself at the very epicenter of the geographical sphere of U.S. interests in the Caribbean. Given its locus among Caribbean Basin territories, Jamaica holds a place of especial significance in the study of regional problems. As one author remarked with perspicacity in an 1898 publication, in this island the most typical Caribbean Basin questions can be viewed in microcosm by the research analyst.

The island is almost at the exact centre of the great American Mediterranean. It lies just half-way between Galveston and the mouth of the Orinoco, the southern point of Florida and the northern part of South America, the eastern end of the Antilles (St. Thomas) and the western indentations of the Gulf of Honduras, and the most northern of the Bahamas and the Gulf of Atrato. *This position is important from political, geographic, biologic, and geologic points of view, and makes the island a typical base of study for one interested in Antillean problems.*¹

Physically, Jamaica is a most beautiful place, and today it is an internationally renowned tourist resort. But it was not always

recognized as such. At one time diseases were so rampant in the Antilles and the mortality rate so high that travel to (or residence in) the region was thought by whites to be quite unwholesome.² Yet, whatever the historical reputation of the Caribbean with regard to salubrity, by the turn of the twentieth century the image of the area had undergone so drastic a transformation that these shores were instead lauded as eminently desirable places to visit. So much, for instance, had Barbados become a vacation resort by 1911–1912 that the colonial secretary was obliged to note in his report, “the colony owes much of its increasing prosperity to the visitors who stay in the island.”³ These came not only from North America and the United Kingdom but from South America as well, particularly from Brazil.⁴

The Bahamas likewise had been emerging as a rich man’s paradise as far back as 1873, when it had recorded its largest tally so far of visitors, with nearly five hundred arrivals.⁵ The takeoff of Bahamian tourism occurred, however, in the 1890s, when Henry Flagler, who had brought the Florida East Coast Railway to Miami, turned his attention to Nassau, where he not only purchased but built hotels.⁶ Still another boost for Bahamian tourism came in 1895 when the second independence war broke out in Cuba, diverting to these nearby isles the hundreds of Americans who had been in the habit of visiting Havana. As for Cuba itself, one American tour organizer alone, Colonel H. B. Plant, brought some 20,000 visitors to the island each winter season prior to the outbreak of the 1895 rebellion.⁷ In short, from Barbados to the Bahamas, Cuba to Bermuda, by the early twentieth century these islands began to be transformed into playgrounds for itinerant Caucasians in search of health and enjoyment.⁸ Once tropical plantations, purportedly unfit for white residence, these islands were being touted as veritable gardens of Eden.

Placed in historical perspective, the growth of tropical island tourism was but the spillover into these parts of the passenger traffic until then confined to a holiday circuit in the North Atlantic. Modern tourism owed its gestation to the industrial revo-

lution and the need it engendered for periodic relief from the psychological stresses and strains of the factory system and urbanism.⁹ Facilitating this imperative for the occasional holiday in quieter and healthier surroundings was the growth of mechanized transport, which was making substantial strides forward at that time. Perhaps the greatest revolution in transportation since the inventions of the wheel and the sail was the creation of the steam engine, and through it the railway and steamshipping. Steam, which had played such a dynamic role in the industrial revolution, on being applied to transport in the nineteenth century made it possible for far more people to travel, and travel far more cheaply, than before. As the demand for travel grew the tour operator made his appearance, a reflection in itself of the quickening pace of life.¹⁰

The earliest and most renowned of these agents was Thomas Cook. In 1841 he embarked upon his career as a tour organizer and arranged an excursion by train from Leicester to Loughborough for 570 trippers at a return fare of one shilling per person.¹¹ A decade later Cook was arranging travel and accommodation for 165,000 visitors to the Great Exhibition in London. Following that, he initiated trips to the Continent, beginning with the Paris Exhibition of 1855. Such was his success that 20,000 people participated in Cook's tour to the Paris Exhibition of 1867 and over 75,000 to the exhibition of 1878. By 1866, Cook ventured into transatlantic tours with the organization of his first trip to the United States. It was from this developing holiday enterprise, therefore, that some individuals in the 1860s felt Jamaica could gainfully benefit, by promotion abroad as a health spa.¹²

That tourism as a phenomenon first materialized with the industrial revolution is demonstrated by the fact that the word itself had not existed in the English language before then.¹³ In the manufacturing centers of the U.S. northeast, around 1800, where Puritanism held sway, a lust for recreational travel (i.e., tourism) was considered something morally reprehensible—as sinful as alcohol and as aberrant as sexual fantasy.¹⁴ But a

quarter of a century later, change had commenced with the inception of tourism in the Catskill Mountains, for example, and the erection there of a huge hotel on the crest of a ridge with a majestic view of the Hudson Valley.¹⁵ The clientele for this hotel were the social elite of New York and Philadelphia, who voyaged for eight hours up the Hudson River by steamboat and then rode a rugged twelve miles by stagecoach to experience the hospitality of this first-rate establishment and bask in its splendid setting.

As time passed, the taboos against tourism steadily faded, and by the post-Civil War years, the holiday traffic was no longer just domestic but international. Already some 40,000 U.S. citizens and alien residents were traveling annually to foreign countries in the 1860s and 1870s, and 100,000 traveled abroad in the 1890s.¹⁶ Scarce wonder that some in Jamaica tried to capitalize on this burgeoning enterprise. Though tourism was a novel form of traffic between Jamaica and its republican neighbor, trade per se was nothing new for the two. Commercial intercourse between them dated back to over a century before U.S. independence.¹⁷

Money also was becoming more mobile in the United States toward the end of the nineteenth century. By 1900, it was evident that throughout the British West Indies in general the United States was displacing the United Kingdom as the dominant trade partner, taking, for example, over two-thirds of these territories' traditional export, sugar.¹⁸ Jamaica itself by 1900 was the target of one of the most intensive U.S. economic penetrations hitherto in the Caribbean Basin. Its railway, for one thing, was in the hands of an American syndicate named the West India Improvement Company. That firm also possessed 74,443 acres of the best Crown lands locally, having acquired these under the terms of an agreement made with the colonial government wherein it received one square mile of land for each mile of rail laid down.¹⁹ Hundreds of acres of land in Jamaica had been bought up by American agribusinesses like the Boston Fruit Company. By the 1880s the banana had become Jamaica's

largest export crop and was shipped exclusively to U.S. markets. As for the island's import trade, U.S. goods (footwear, glassware, hardware, iron, agricultural tools, furniture, etc.) had begun to supplant British brands.²⁰ In all, perched on the geographical periphery of the United States, by the close of the nineteenth century Jamaica seemed ready to succumb to the status of an economic appendage.

In spite of the fact that the economic bonds between Jamaica and the United States tightened, the social relationship between the two became more strained. The nadir was reached by 1912 when the relationship had so deteriorated that one Jamaican described the United States as a "social enemy but commercial friend."²¹ Paramount in this perception was the color question, which nowhere else in the North Atlantic was manifested with as much vehemence as in the American republic.²² Although Jamaica itself was not free from the problem of caste (a legacy of slavery), it was not under a regime of lynch law, as was a large part of the United States, where approximately 1,700 blacks were lynched from 1885 through 1894. There also, this "blind, wicked unreasonable race prejudice" (to use Reverend C. A. Wilson's term) further took the lives of some 1,100 black victims between 1900 and 1917.²³

The Southern way of thinking was fast threatening to engulf the nation in general. Following the United States' adoption of a policy of imperialist expansion into the Pacific and the Caribbean in 1898, the spread of belief in the so-called inferiority of tropical peoples served to bolster the existing justifications and myths of Southern states regarding race.²⁴ Amid this background of mounting chauvinism, as the United States assumed the "white man's burden," a new aspect in the relations between Yankees and Caribbean Creoles came with the inception of tourist travel to these islands. Jamaica was center stage in this development, as it was among the earliest of the West Indian islands to host the moneyed leisure classes from Europe and North America.

While in most export businesses producers and consumers are

separated and seldom interact face-to-face, the unique feature of tourism as an export staple is that the tourist must come in person to the spot to partake of the product. According to one Jamaican analyst, feelings of race hatred generally accompanied Americans abroad.²⁵ Back in 1860, well before the Jamaica tourist industry began, William Sewell had complained of this. In response to the naked racism exhibited during visits by American sea captains, for example, Sewell remonstrated that “the feeling here [in Jamaica], and in all the British West Indies, against America and Americans owing to just such bad taste and brutality, is bitter in the extreme.”²⁶ Jamaican blacks, however, barely differentiated between Americans and other Caucasian passersby. Facing the universal racism of whites of that time, they responded with a general indifference and a perceptible disdain for the occasional foreigner. Another visitor to the colony in 1861–1862 was snubbed time and again in his encounters with local blacks:

“Can you tell me, my good man, where I can buy some tobacco?” was the query I addressed to a large black, who was busily employed in eating a piece of sugar-cane.

“Tobacco,” he drawled out.

“Yes, tobacco; for smoking.”

“Why, dere’s some to be got up dere,” he said, in a tone which pretty clearly showed that he disliked being questioned—(certainly it was very hot, lazy weather, but that does not affect a negro)—pointing with his hand up the street, but in such an indefinite way that “up dere” might mean the church steeple or the blue mountains in the distance.

“Well, where? Up this Street? This side of the way?”

He looked at me with a sort of sleepy stare, grunted out “Yes; ’spose so,” and resumed his attentions to the sugar-cane.

I had similar good fortune with two others I addressed. After that I did not dare ask any more questions. It is disagreeable to be snubbed, *even by a black man.*²⁷

When the tourist industry emerged a generation later in Jamaica, one hurdle in its path to success was the manifest xenophobia of the typical black islander. Compounding this di-

lemma, the years after 1870 witnessed a new imperialist movement and the partitioning of the African continent, alongside which a new pseudoscientific racism developed to rationalize white hegemony over the tropical world at large. The “damned niggers” with whom the Caucasian tourists had to deal were no less sensitive about their freedom in 1900 than they had been two generations earlier when Sewell, for example, had visited the area.²⁸ What these black sensibilities meant for the burgeoning tourist industry constitutes one of the major preoccupations of this study.

There were numerous complications inherent in any attempt to found a tourist trade in Jamaica. To begin with, the island had to transform its feared reputation as a white man’s graveyard into a new renown as a vibrant health resort. It was also necessary to breach the traditional anti-Americanism of black Jamaicans if the island was to emerge as a playground for visitors from the mainland. What was the character of the interplay between Jamaican society, with its much vaunted absence of Jim Crow regulations, and the American tourists, cultural vectors of a society steeped in racial segregation? What was the role of the tourist industry in the economic history of the colony, and how did this relate to questions of economic transformation and development? What, finally, was the legacy of the infant holiday trade? It is with such questions that this work is concerned.

The study presented in the following chapters is a historical exposé of tourism in its various economic, social, and political manifestations. Though primarily focused upon the past, its optic is not narrowly historical, for many of the dilemmas this book delineates are today still unresolved. The backside of the contemporary tourism in the Caribbean continues to function as “a bastion of last resistance to social change.”²⁹ One author portrays some of the issues in question today in these terms:

Tourism has become a trap for the Caribbean people. It has deepened the economic dependency of the region, chiefly on the United States, and has caused deep psychological and cultural damage. . . . Tourism has grown to become the largest single industry in the Caribbean. But it

is an industry out of control, where the costs often outweigh the benefits and where the benefits often go to foreign firms. Being somebody else's playground has meant that the Caribbean's fishermen have become beach boys, its farmers have turned into waiters, and the TNC hotels are defining the local culture.³⁰

How that all began is discussed in part one of this study. Part two discusses the legacy bequeathed to subsequent generations of Jamaicans.