






THE WEST INDIA COMMITTEE CIRCULAR




THE OFFICIAL ORGAN OF THE WEST INDIA COMMITTEE. ESTAB: CIRCA A.D. 1735





SUMMER 2019

PUBLISHED EVERY QUARTER


ACROSS TWO OCEANS: SKETCH BY OUR SPECIAL ARTIST, MR. MELTON PRIOR.



CARNIVAL IN PORT OF SPAIN, TRINIDAD.

INCORPORATED BY ROYAL CHARTER



The West India Committee Circular



Table of Contents

Leading articles - 1

Notes of Interest - 4

The West India Committee report - 4

100 years ago - 5

From the Library - 6

From 1886, the West India Committee published a journal, *The West India Committee Circular*, which at its height, was issued, every fortnight. This ran until the end of 1958 when it was replaced with *The West India Committee Chronicle*, which was eventually in turn replaced by *Caribbean Insight*, which ran until the mid to late 1990s. We now are pleased to relaunch the West India Committee Circular as a short e-publication to inform readers about the latest developments concerning the Caribbean and its relationship with the U.K., as well as to inform people about the work of the West India Committee.

Leading articles

Royal Visit to the Caribbean

In March, the Prince of Wales and his wife the Duchess of Cornwall, carried out a thirteen day tour of the Caribbean. It began in St. Lucia on 17th March, marking forty years of St. Lucian independence and continued on to St. Vincent and the Grenadines where, amongst other engagements, the Royal Couple laid a wreath at the Cenotaph in Kingstown in memory of those soldiers from the country who had died during

the World Wars.

In St. Kitts and Nevis, the Prince visited Brimstone Hill Fortress, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where he had opened the Prince of Wales Bastion in 1973, and the Duchess visited the Heritage Plantation House on Nevis to meet local women and learn more about life on the island. In a one day visit to Grenada, after being welcomed at the country's Houses of Parliament and meeting with the Prime Minister, their Royal Highnesses visited the House of Chocolate, a museum dedicated to Grenada's status as a world leader in producing such confections, before learning about Grenada's growing agricultural sector and its Blue Economy.

The first day in Barbados saw Prince Charles, after he and the Duchess of Cornwall met with the Prime Minister and Governor-General, visit the Nidhe Israel Synagogue, one of the oldest synagogues in the Western Hemisphere, built in 1654. The Duchess visited a local school and attended a reception for Women of the World, an organisation that celebrates the achievements of women and girls and calls attention to the issues that they face around the world. Her Highness has been President of the organisation since 2015. In the afternoon, the Prince attended a reception at the Coral Reef Club Hotel for the Prince's Trust International, a charity founded by his Highness to share the successful programmes of the Prince's Trust globally. The evening saw another reception at the Prime Minister's residence. The next day, their Highnesses attended a service at St. Michael's Cathedral before departing the country.

Undoubtedly the most notable part of the tour was a visit to Cuba, at the request of the British Government. This was the first time that any

members of the British Royal family had visited the communist island and it was hoped that the visit would promote the growing links between the two countries. They were treated to a walking tour of Old Havana, which was notable in that no barriers were in place for the crowds, allowing the Royal couple to meet the local people. Following this there was a welcome dinner hosted by the Cuban President and his wife. The following day they visited John Lennon Square to see a classic British vehicles show and, later in the day, the Prince visited Mariel Solar Park and an organic farm, demonstrating effective management of the environmental issues on which he has campaigned for many years. The Duchess paid a visit to the Federation of Cuban Women to learn how the country is tackling the issue of Domestic Violence, and also was interested to observe a community dance group.

Their final stop was the Cayman Islands, which was Prince Charles' first visit to Cayman since his military service in the Royal Navy aboard *HMS Minerva* in 1972. Here their Royal Highnesses visited Pedro St. James, the oldest house in the territory, first constructed in the late eighteenth century. Whilst the Duchess visited the Cayman Islands Crisis Centre and the Jasmine Villa Hospice, the Prince journeyed to the two Sister Islands of Cayman Brac and Little Cayman, and came face to face with a Blue Iguana, a rare lizard endemic to the Cayman Islands.

The importance of democracy *by Harry Cluff*

Democracy is the pride and passion of every civilised country. An Athenian idea, it seeks to include everyone in the decisions that endorse and install leaders and legislators. Democracy is a word rooted in the two Greek terms

'demos' (the people) & 'kratia' (rule), which simply translates as 'the rule of the people'; it is a system of government with the practice and principle of social equality by which the entire eligible population select their representatives and therefore the direction of policy and conduct. Churchill called democracy 'the worst form of government except for all the rest', and although this amusing description is as oxymoronic as someone saying 'I am the tallest except for everyone else' his flippant remark is a serious comment on the hazards and hardships of our attempt to practice a potentially perfect system.

A man called Cleisthenes is credited with introducing democracy to Athens five hundred years before the birth of Christ. The age of this ideology (older than Jesus, Alexander the Great, Aristotle and the Prophet Muhammad) might suggest an inherent and eternal inclination in humanity for freedom and fellowship, however the birth and evolution of democracy has been wrought with obstacles and occlusions. In Athens, the right to vote was confined to a certain sort of citizen and from 1432 to 1832 only the ownership of property qualified a person to vote in Britain. Women of course could not vote and indeed were unable to until universal suffrage swept the European continent in the early decades of the previous century. Although Britain has been considered a bastion for democracy and is regularly characterised as a champion of the cause against tyrants like Napoleon, it was deemed a dirty word by many of its unwilling adherents and unconscious advocates until the Representation Acts of 1918 and 1928 when all men and women over the age of 21 were permitted to vote. It has been accidentally advanced by Kings and commoners alike who harboured little of the enthusiasm we ourselves share for our present style of governance. The inclusivity of the

practice explains its appeal. To trust in all people to choose their masters and display their dissatisfaction or congratulations at the ballot box. It is a privilege over which wars have been raged and lives have been lost but it seems to be less appreciated now than it was some thirty years ago.

The last ten years of geo-political drama has demonstrated an insidious fact, that undemocratic countries possess an advantage over their democratic kin. Russia can act more decisively and drastically on a foreign policy matter than Great Britain or America because they are less restrained by their parliaments and require no pause to accrue the consensus of their countrymen; partially because these authoritarian governments, like Russia and Iran, manage the consensus by controlling the media and the world-perception of their people and also because these unchecked and powerful leaders are permitted to pour disproportionate funds into their defence budgets. This allows nations with smaller economies to rival larger economic countries and it shows that nations with less money (there has been a proven link between wealth creation and democracy. Freedom is apparently conducive for enterprise) can punch above their weight and bruise these democratic behemoths who insist on a moment of thoughtful introspection and self-questioning before acting.

Democracy has disappeared from the world many times and has had its existence threatened as regularly as the coming of English rain. We have entered an age where the virtues of democracy are less apparent and the vices of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes are getting more and more effective. The now deceased Labour MP and Minister Tony Benn used to use a thought-experiment to assess a person's belief in democracy: would you rather a bad

parliament or a good king? It's a question we should all ask ourselves and the answer should prompt a passionate commitment to the king or parliament you choose.

Notes of Interest

The Institute of Jamaica, Jamaica's premier cultural and scientific organisation, is aiming to restore Fort Charles in Port Royal, where Lord Nelson was stationed at one time, as a 'living history' space, with information on the soldiers of the West India Regiments who served there.

Antigua has an ongoing project to restore their Government House in St. John's, a building dating from the early nineteenth century that served as home to the colonial governors and where the Governor-General now resides. The West India Committee is helping restoration efforts by producing a short guidebook, the sale of which will go toward the upkeep of the building.

A recent change to the Constitution of Anguilla means that the position of Chief Minister has been renamed to that of Premier, in line with many other British Overseas Territories. In addition, it limits the number of terms that a Premier can serve to two and alters the qualification of those who can vote and stand in elections. It also abolishes the office of nominated member of the House of Assembly, beginning from the next general election on the island.

There are suggestions that the Caribbean may see a large amount of Sargassum Seaweed washed up on its shores this year. This could cause issues for the important tourism industry by leaving prime tourist beaches unusable due to the sheer volume of vegetation deposited. It is believed that the increasing amount of

Sargassum in recent years is due to climate change and that it is beginning to disrupt coastal ecosystems.

The British Virgin Islands held a general election in February, resulting in a conclusive victory for the Virgin Islands Party, winning power from the incumbent National Democratic Party. The Virgin Islands Party, the oldest active political party in the territory, secured eight of the thirteen seats in the House of Assembly, making their leader, Andrew Fahie, Premier.

In a referendum in early May, the people of Belize voted to refer the ongoing territorial dispute between their country and Guatemala to the International Court of Justice. The border dispute has existed since the 1820s, with Guatemala previously claiming sovereignty over all of Belize. Although Guatemala has recognised Belize's independence since the 1990s, they still claim some 11,000 square miles of land in the latter. The Guatemalan people voted to refer the dispute to the I.C.J. in April 2018.

February saw a referendum in Cuba on whether to adopt a new constitution, which had been approved by the National Assembly last year. The revised constitution sees several changes, moving away from the communist ideology that has governed Cuba for decades, including recognising private property and foreign investment, the right of *habeas corpus* and the presumption of innocence in criminal cases. It also omits the aim included in the previous constitution of working towards a communist society and instead commits to work towards a socialist one. Ninety-one percent of those who voted approved of the new document and it came into force on 10th April.

The West India Committee Report

For the last eighteen months, the West India Committee has been working with the Government of the Cayman Islands London Office to examine the history and heritage of that territory. David Wells, the West India Committee's Research and Training manager, has been working to produce a number of outcomes. These have included an education pack and poster aimed at young schoolchildren, as well as an e-book on the history of the Cayman Islands, which are available through the Government of the Cayman Islands London Office Website. In addition, he has also produced material to be used as part of an exhibition and for a short film on the history of Cayman. In addition, he has researched Captain Bligh's brief visit to Cayman on *HMS Providence* on behalf of the West India Committee and the introduction of Breadfruit and other plants to the territory for the Caymanian Agricultural Show.

David recently completed the final outcome of the project, a two hundred and fifty-six page book on the territory, *Beloved Isles Cayman: The History and Heritage of the Cayman Islands*. To be published in the near future, it is designed to serve as an accessible introduction to Caymanian history which will hopefully prove popular amongst both casual readers and school pupils. The work includes many images from the Committee's UNESCO inscribed collection depicting the Cayman Islands at various points during their history and also features reproductions of historic documents concerning the islands, including the first official Handbook, published in 1908.

The West India Committee has recently been reestablishing ties with the London-based High Commissioners of the countries of the

Caribbean, meeting with the representatives of St. Christopher's (St. Kitts), Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados. Of particular interest is the West India Committee's Library and Archive collections, which will hopefully serve as a useful resource for the High Commissioners concerning the mutual heritage and shared links between their respective nations and the United Kingdom.

It is hoped that in the coming months the West India Committee will begin work on a new project in conjunction with the National Army Museum, *The West Indian Soldier*. Over the next two years, the Committee and the Museum aim to produce a book and education material, hold community workshops, culminating in an exhibition at the Museum in March 2021 that will tour the UK and the Caribbean.

100 Years Ago

In this section we look back to see what *The West India Committee Circular* covered a century ago. In May 1919, *The West India Committee Circular* reported on the return of the men of the British West Indies Regiment to their homelands and other matters of note in the aftermath of the First World War.

Also of great interest was the recent announcement on 30th April that year of 'Imperial Preference' in the Budget in Parliament. This meant that Customs duties would be charged at a cheaper rate for goods from the dominions of the British Empire. The Committee also compiled a list of these new duties that would come into force on 1st September and felt that they would be a vehicle for prosperity throughout the empire, particularly aiding the West Indian Cocoa trade.

News from the Caribbean included continuing

concern about a labour shortage in British Guiana's (now Guyana) agricultural sector, with suggestions that it should look to the West Indies for workers. In Antigua, Sir Edward Mereweather arrived to take up the position of Governor, although he had been appointed to the role some three years before.

The *Nassau Guardian* issued a strong rebuke to Mr. L.G. Brice, a merchant who had advocated the annexation of the Bahamas by the U.S.A. Barbados saw the visit of a squadron of American Warships. Jamaica was faced with a deficit and the Governor was journeying to England to ask the British Government for a loan of £1,000,000. St. Vincent was considering creating a memorial to the men from the island who had lost their lives on active service.

The Committee's Annual General Meeting was held at the end of May and the Annual report of the executive and the Committee's accounts were published in the Circular.

Late May saw the return of many of the West Indian troops to their homelands on the transport Ajax. They were welcomed by large and cheering crowds, but some men returning to Trinidad were injured, some severely, due a collapsing deck aboard one of the landing barges.

Early June saw a report on the desire for immigrants to British Guiana from the Caribbean Islands, Java, China and the Pacific Islands as the then colony was very sparsely populated.

St. Kitts suffered heavy rains which caused great damage which caused great damage to sugar cane, to the extent that new streams had been created in the fields, and to roads. It was predicted that it would take the Public Works

department several months before transportation around the island was restored to normal.

By arrangement with the West India Committee, Dr. Louis Sambon delivered a lecture on Sanitation in the Tropics at the Royal Society of Medicine, with some practical advice for health and disease prevention.

The officers and men of the 1st Battalion of the British West Indies Regiment, presented the Battalion's War Diary to the West India Committee in thanks for their support during the First World War. This remains in the Committee's collection to this day.

From the Library

In each issue we will feature an item from the West India Committee's Library and Archive, recognised as a UNESCO Memory of the World. The Collection covers over a thousand years of Caribbean history and several of the oldest books and maps date back to the 1590s, before the time that the English first colonised the region. In addition to a wide array of books, images and maps, the Collection also includes some archaeological artefacts.

This issue's item is one of the most recent additions to the collection, donated amongst many other prints and books earlier this year by the family of a former member of the West India Committee. These items are held separately from the main collections as the Maureen Hanton Collection in her memory.

The print on the front cover comes from the *Illustrated London News*' edition of 5th May 1888. It depicts a lively carnival passing through a central street in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Whilst most of these prints were in black and white, at some point this one has been coloured, adding

further vibrancy to the scene. As arguably the best known of West Indian cultural traditions, this image gives us a snapshot into the history of Carnival and allows us to compare it to modern events to see how it has developed over the last 131 years.

Most noticeable are the revellers in the centre. Some of the men are dressed as demons, whilst their partners are clad in white and lace, wearing white-face masks. The band following behind them on the left playing banjos are wearing costumes reminiscent of sailors with white beards. A man on the right of the scene smiles broadly but wears glasses with a huge nose that reminds one of a bird's beak and the mask of a renaissance doctor. Further back in the procession, we see even more colourful costumes and tall hats, some with feathers, which are the ancestors of the costumes that feature at modern carnivals today.

Although the focus of the scene is clearly the revellers, it is also worth paying attention to the spectators. At street level we see lower class spectators, such as the two young boys on the right who are walking barefoot with patched clothes. The higher echelons of society occupy the balconies above street level, with a bird's eye view of the festivities. It may be noted that for the most part these higher class people are either mixed race or white, reflecting the link between status and skin colour that was a remnant of the old plantocracy social structure. Nevertheless, they too are looking on with smiles and expressions of joy on their faces, showing that this was an important event for all of the inhabitants of Port of Spain, save perhaps one. Amongst the spectators is the clergyman on the far right of the image, looking on with disapproval at the unrestrained merrymaking, particularly at the two participants that have seemingly come up to address him.