

## THE SPANISH CARIBBEAN

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*ABORIGINAL AND SPANISH COLONIAL TRINIDAD.* By LINDA A. NEWSON.  
(London: Academic Press, 1976. Pp. 344.)

*THE SPANISH CARIBBEAN: FROM COLUMBUS TO CASTRO.* By LOUISE L. CRIPPS. (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co. and Schenkman Publishing Co., 1979. Pp. 250. \$5.95.)

Spanish rule in the Caribbean region was virtually unchallenged for more than a century, following the discovery of the New World by the Europeans. When that challenge came, it was felt first in the smaller islands, where Spanish settlement, if any, had been dispersed and generally unsuccessful. The acquisition of colonies there by the British, the Dutch, and the French was a protracted sequence of events, however, of which the capitulation of Spanish Trinidad in 1797 was but one. There was a presumption, even on Great Britain's part, that Trinidad might one day become Spanish again; but she became a British colony instead, until receiving her independence in recent years.

The Greater Antilles give a different picture. There, an attack on Spanish rule in the form of unwarranted settlement was first mounted in western Santo Domingo (Española), which was only sparsely settled, by those odd "colonists" who would come to be known as the buccaneers, midway through the first quarter of the seventeenth century. But it was the fall of Jamaica in 1655 that really ended exclusive Spanish rule in the big islands. By 1898, only Puerto Rico and Cuba remained politically Spanish; and only Santo Domingo (the eastern two-thirds of Española) was culturally Spanish.

At one end of the great arc extending from the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico to the South American mainland ("the Spanish Main"), lay Trinidad, to this day the most "Spanish" of England's Caribbean conquests. At the other other end, in East-West array, Puerto Rico, Española, and Cuba, "las tres hermanitas," politically Spanish for longer than any other New World colonies. The books under review here are concerned with these Spanish islands: Newson with Trinidad, from before Columbus to the end of Spanish rule; Cripps with the whole archipelago, but especially the big Hispanic islands, from Columbus to modern times. These are, in every way, books different from each other.

Newson subtitles hers "a study in culture contact." It is a historical geography, and relies much on historical sources (including primary documents in many archives), as well as upon anthropological conceptions about how societies change when encountering and engaging each other. The author's view of culture contact is rather formal, however, and not very persuasive. While she is agreeably obsessed with cultivated plants and domesticated animals (she comes by this quite naturally; her teacher, David Harris, was trained by Sauer and Parsons), her view of culture change results in some unexpected assertions. To give but one instance, we are told that many new crops (which are not named) were introduced into Trinidad from Africa in the eighteenth century (p. 137); but ". . . it is unlikely that many of them were adopted by Spanish landowners since they would have possessed the stigma of slavery." The stigma of slavery inhibited many things; but appetites have commonly surmounted such inhibitions in recent centuries.

In her discussion of the aboriginal (that is, pre-Columbian) economy (pp. 37–62), Newson is thoughtful and thorough, but the whole picture remains iffy—she begins her discussion by frankly saying as much. The term *conuco*, which she seems to attribute to mainland peoples, is Taino, and was used in the Greater Antilles. (Indeed, the author's argument for a slash-and-burn horticulture in aboriginal Trinidad could have been helped by careful inferences from William C. Sturtevant's remarkable article on Taino agriculture, which she cites ("Taino Agriculture," in *The Evolution of Horticultural Systems in Native South America*, edited by J. Wilbert [1961]). The claim (p. 46) that arrowroot was probably grown in aboriginal Trinidad is allowable, if weak; similar claims for the plantain and sugar-cane (p. 46) are weaker. That she is on thin ice is apparent to her: thus, for instance, she hypothesizes the presence of the coconut (p. 46), then retracts it (p. 47). A few other problems with plants are typographical; this must explain how the tomato got to be "Andean" (p. 138), why Acosta's observation on the pomegranate is repeated *verbatim* on pp. 86 and 138, as well as such things as *Calathea alluia* (*sic*), and the genip or jagua or *quinepa* being called a "juniper."

In fact, Newson's careful and detailed extraction of data from many diverse sources, while solidly useful factually, must inevitably rest on too few certainly known features of aboriginal life. She is appropriately cautious in the inference she reaches about life in Trinidad before Columbus. But since it is not even certain that Island-Carib peoples were present among Trinidad's populations (she seems to have overlooked most of the work of the late Douglas Taylor, by the way, including his "Languages and Ghost-Languages in the West Indies"), guesses about the relative importance of fishing and horticulture must remain guesses; and even guesses about the proportions of cultivated maize

and cassava seem risky. When she turns to the social organization of Trinidad's aborigines and to what she labels their "ideology" (pp. 62–67), the ice grows even thinner. Newson not only finds matriliney; she traces it somewhat insouciantly to the presence of matrilocality, which is the consequence, in turn, of the sexual division of labor. (Her major reference on these subjects, by the way, is Sahlins' monograph on a Fijian society, *Moala*.)

The monograph picks up nicely when dealing with the Spanish period, however. Newson develops the theme of "two republics"—what looks like a genuine attempt on the part of the Crown to divide the colony, for the protection of its Indian vassals. The author has been sedulous in her use of available historical materials, and has sought to inform the study with a theoretical perspective on culture change, employing the views of several anthropological evolutionists and ecologists in developing the argument. The difficulty, of course, is that the data do not lend themselves easily to so carefully delineated a treatment; when scanty data are stretched to cover large theories, the results can be disappointing even when the scholarship has been both serious and competent.

Cripps' book is more ambitious, and fails more resoundingly. Although the intent is to deal with the "Hispanic" islands, Cripps throws her net even more widely. In so doing, she has produced an entirely remarkable work on several counts. First of all, the typography for this book is terrible. The bibliography (pp. 229–39) is most revealing in this regard; but the text is unremittingly bad as well. Errors of fact are common. The Island-Caribs did not speak Cariban (p. 9); the aboriginal inhabitants of the Antilles did not make "bread with a kind of millet or maize or yucca or cassava" (p. 25); mangoes were not imported to the Caribbean from Africa (p. 69); sugar-cane growing did not "spread to the other Spanish islands and throughout the Caribbean" from Cuba (p. 71); Loiza Aldea, on the north coast of Puerto Rico is not "the largest concentration of Negro population on the island" (p. 74); and so on.

And yet, in spite of such egregious inaccuracies, there is a spirit and pungency to Cripps' account that could have been its saving grace, had she received serious help and advice from editors. This reviewer finds her criticisms of Samuel Eliot Morison's fruity turns of phrase (p. 37) entirely justified. Her stress upon the theme of resistance in Caribbean history, though at times exaggerated, is much needed. Indeed, if intentions were enough, I would applaud this effort. It is unfortunate that ideological conviction should be so let down by hasty and careless scholarship; and those who call themselves "editors" in this case have much to answer for.