

BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean, 1492-1969.

By ERIC WILLIAMS. New York, 1971. Harper & Row. Tables. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. Pp. 576. Cloth. \$10.95.

Dr. Eric Williams, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, author of the now classic *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), several studies on the Caribbean, and a somewhat premature self-exculpatory autobiography, is one of the few active statesmen who continues to be involved in historical research. His latest book may be perceived both as an analysis of vital issues in the Caribbean experience and as history used in the task of nationalist reconstruction.

At one level of perception Williams is concerned with the evolution of the entire Caribbean community; not as the mere sum of individual territorial political histories, but rather through a conceptual framework that is both introspective and comparative. Many of the realistic (as opposed to romantic) structural components of the historic and contemporary Caribbean are brought into focus: slavery; the economics of plantations; colonial domination; immigration and emigration; revolution and counterrevolution; internal political, social and economic fragmentation; constitutional diversity; the continued process of imperial disengagement; excessive economic, political and psychological dependence on former imperial powers; racial tension; current competitive rather than cooperative strategies of economic development; exploitation by multinational corporations; chronic unemployment and underemployment; and the all-pervading Yankeeophobia. While neither the perspective nor insights are entirely new (given the production from scholars and universities in the region) the author employs a rhythmic interplay between past and present and delivers the whole in incisive prose.

The second level of perception is more intricate since it concerns Williams' dual roles of professional historian and Caribbean nationalist. As an historian motivated by a virile anti-colonial nationalism, he embellishes his research with an attitude of strict moral censure and a merciless verbal flogging of imperialists and imperial historians for their distorted perspectives on the Caribbean. In the last two chapters, on "Castroism" and "The Future of the Caribbean," he is clearly ambivalent. As an historian he admires Fidel Castro and the Cuban effort

at self-assertion, but as a statesman he cannot condone the export of Cuban “totalitarianism.” Nor can he tolerate the possibility that, in the event of Cuba’s search for a larger market in the West Indies, the nation of Trinidad and Tobago should have to surrender the independent development of its own economy “in order to be a dumping ground for Cuba’s products. . . .” This reviewer, as a Trinidadian, could not object to Williams’ realistic attitude—in the absence of a larger, more efficient Caribbean Economic Community. But one would today surely question the Prime Minister’s unabashed subsequent suggestion that the Trinidad and Tobago development model be adopted by other Commonwealth Caribbean countries as a viable alternative to the Cuban and Puerto Rican extremes. The Trinidad uprising of April 1970 (after the book was written) has since brought the model under closer scrutiny.

Ultimately, it is unfair it try to divorce the historian from the statesman in this work. Its discernible ethos is the author’s conviction that the Caribbean peoples must come to terms with their common historical past and undergo a transmutation that will facilitate future political, economic and social innovation towards the creation of a national and regional character. The need is for “a psychological revolution among the Caribbean peoples themselves and metropolitan empathy with Caribbean aspirations.” The Cuban Revolution and the “Black Power” movements are symptomatic of attempts to satisfy the first need. A multitude of angels may have to weep before the second is satisfied!

One can quibble about certain aspects of the book. Discussions on some of the larger social themes of the twentieth-century Caribbean—dictatorship, trade unionism, the problems of acculturation, religion, and contemporary race relations—are too brief. But then Williams’ preoccupation is decidedly economic history, characterized by a wealth of statistics. While statistics may enhance his masterful probe of the plantation system, at the same time they further dehumanize the slaves. Since the book is intended for a wide audience the Prime Minister may be excused for not providing footnote citations, but fellow scholars will find the omission irksome. And the annotated bibliography is a *lagniappe*.

These observations should not undercut the significance of this major contribution to Caribbean scholarship. It may not be, as the publisher’s dust jacket proclaims, “the first complete history of the area as a whole to have been written.” That dubious “first” probably belongs to Parry and Sherlock’s *A Short History of the West Indies* (1956).

But Williams' study is a formidable *tour de force*. It will probably be surpassed, in the near future, only by the long-anticipated multi-volume project on Caribbean history from the University of the West Indies.

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ANTHONY BRYAN

De Cristóbal Colón a Fidel Castro. El Caribe, Frontera Imperial. By JUAN BOSCH. Madrid, 1970. Ediciones Alfaguara. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xi, 698. Paper. \$9.95.

Former President of the Dominican Republic Juan Bosch adds to his awesome literary credentials with his latest work, *De Cristóbal Colón a Fidel Castro*. After the vitriolic *Pentagonism, A Substitute for Imperialism* (1968), an emotional expression decrying the spread of the United States military-industrial complex into Latin America, Bosch decided to expand his concept of *pentagonismo* into a concerted denunciation of imperialism.

The result was a lengthy consideration of the conflict between European and American power for conquest and territory in the Caribbean. Delineating the Caribbean area to exclude the Bahamas and other islands that might well have been included, Bosch begins with a broad historical approach to his main theme of imperialism. In elegant and often mellifluous Spanish prose, he deals with the colonial period rather traditionally. He covers Spanish, French, and other imperialist powers' treatment of the Indians, Africans, and filibusterers who ventured into the cockpit of the New World—the Caribbean.

Apparently, Bosch had free time and access to an extensive library while in exile in Spain. Thus, he realized the often held desire of many historians to write that definitive work in one's special field of interest. It was an illusive and fleeting fancy for nineteenth-century gentlemen-scholars who filled volumes of epic, but oft-times pedantic compilations that few people have either the inclination or the fortitude to endure to the end. Occasionally exiled politicians like Bosch fall victim to this literary entrapment and produce a work that reflects upon all the major historical roots, investigates all the multifaceted ramifications, and contains all those ideas, notes, and concepts that were omitted from earlier works. The result is very similar to a mental purgative. When it might also justify a formerly held belief or vilify an enemy in the process, so much the better.

Yet fortunately for the general (Spanish-speaking) reader, Bosch is a polished and professional writer. From a literary point of view,