Jamaican Journeyman: Job-Seekers from the Isle of Sun and Poverty

"This island excels the others for the goodness of the Ayr, and bounty of the soyl, it is for the most part a plain and even country, yielding in great abundance whatever is necessary for Man's Life". (A True Description of Jamaica, 1657.)

On a January evening—very cold, as they say in the weather reports, and with a touch of mist, a train from the South coast arrived at a main-line London station and sent its passengers tumbling and spreading onto the platform, then towards the barrier in a jumble of suit-cases and parcels, children and clothing. They were not the usual type of traveller. Their clothes were thin against the cold; many wore pyjamas as added protection, with towels around their necks and heads. Some sported wide-brimmed hats. A few came pathetically carrying stringed musical instruments. "You can always tell them", said the man leaning against the bookstall, "From a distance they haven't got any faces". Another batch of immigrants from the West Indies had come to London. It must, one thought, have been a pretty powerful Something to have brought them, the Caribbean sun still warm on their backs, to the bitterness of an English Winter.

It is impossible to accurately judge the number of Jamaicans who have recently arrived for, as British citizens, they are not compelled to register as aliens are. A reliable estimate puts the number of West Indians who came in 1954 at over 11,000—at the end of the year about 1,000 were arriving every month. 1955 is expected to bring another 15,000, most of them from Jamaica. These immigrants are living mainly in the large cities—Manchester (in Moss Side, an older part of the City), Birmingham, Coventry and London, where the Boroughs of Brixton and Paddington have taken a lot of them.

Whatever their qualifications, the Jamaicans are for the present content to take almost any job, so they mainly do unskilled work. Birmingham has nearly 300, and Oxford 20, working as bus conductors. The London Passenger Transport Board has employed some, but none for work in a bus crew. The Jamaicans are vulnerable to the rack-renter for they have come on to the end of a long waiting list for housing (in Birmingham, for example, it is 60,000) and they prefer to make their homes in areas where their countrymen are already living. The tendency to live together has hampered the Jamaican's absorption into the population at large; Birmingham is the only city to have tried to disperse them. Many are in overcrowded slums—some, it is said, owned by profiteering landlords who are themselves West Indians. The problem has aroused much concern; in Parliament it has provoked questions and a "ten-minute-rule" private member's Bill. Several delegations from borough and city councils have been worrying the Colonial Office; it is even reported to have been discussed at a Cabinet meeting.

Jamaicans in Brixton

About 3,000 West Indians are living in the Borough of Lambeth, in South London. Most have taken homes in Brixton, packing themselves into Geneva Road and Somerleyton Road, where the houses are large and high and dowdy. To judge from the number of windows which at night are lit up, with the shadow of a dressing-table mirror thrown onto faded, pinned curtains, a lot of the houses have been divided into

flats and bed-sitting rooms. "For Sale--8 Lots Without Reserve" reads a notice outside one dusty looking residence. Is this, one wonders, the work of some rogue landlord?

On a wall in one these roads someone has whitewashed the slogan "Keep Brixton White" The whitewash has been partly covered by brown paint and the weather has taken off some of the remainder. But the cool, menacing words are still just discernible and it is faintly sickening to read them in the lamplight. Yet from the evidence of a number of visits to Brixton, one would say that on the whole the Jamaicans are quite unobjectionable; as sober and as responsible in their behaviour and as modest in their bearing as anyone could wish. They have their mannerisms, it is true. In the local pub ("Select Dining Room Upstairs") they play darts with the regulars and to a man keep their hats on their heads. Some, like the two men who passed into the night, discussing how to keep warm, walk as to some inner, throbbing music. But only the chronically irascible would object to such things. There are certain London streets which have the reputation of being "tough", so that, it is said, the police always patrol them in pairs. That is a fairly reliable guide to the amount of civic disturbance habitually expected from any given neighbourhood. Along Geneva and Somerleyton Roads the policemen walk singly. Truth to tell, there are cat-calls to be heard in Brixton of a Saturday night, but they are from the local Teddy-boys and their flat-shoed girl friends, who as bearers of a white skin are exempt from having rude words written on walls about them.

Beautiful Jamaica

The Jamaicans come from an island in the Caribbean Sea—about 90 miles south of Cuba--which was discovered by Columbus in 1494 and called by him St Jago, after the patron saint of Spain. This name was changed to the Indian Xayamaca, which means "Land of Wood and Water", an allusion to the lush vegetation and many springs which give the island its beautiful scenery. Xayamaca later became corrupted to the present name of Jamaica. The island is about 4,400 square miles in area and has many luxuriant forests which furnish abundant dyestuffs and spices and some rare cabinet woods. The mean average temperature is 78° F., the best period being January to March, when in England we are treading the cities' slush; Jamaica, of course, has its occasional earthquakes and hurricanes. Principal exports are bananas, sugar, rum (said to be the best in the world), raw coffee and cigars. An extensive fruit trade is carried on with Great Britain and New Zealand; deposits of bauxite (aluminium ore) are in development. Jamaica's population, at 1 1/2 million, is about twice that of Manchester; nearly one half of those working in agriculture.

The island is a popular Winter holiday resort which attracts 120,000 vacationists each year, about 65% of them from America. Those lucky enough to arrive at the airport are greeted with a large glass of rum, presented with the compliments of the Sugar Manufacturers' Association. Kingston, on the south coast, is the capital—it is an ugly city with some dense slums. The principal Jamaican newspaper is the *Daily Gleaner*, a well respected publication. Cricket is the islanders' favourite game and when a Test match is being played at Sabina Park they cheerfully risk their necks at the tops of surrounding palm trees and houses to watch the game. Sometimes they are not so cheerful; they recently beat up the wife and child of an umpire who had adjudged a local hero to have lost his wicket when within reach of a century in a Test match.

Spaniards and Sugar

Spain held Jamaica, with the blessing of a Papal dispensation, during a century and a half of cruelty and neglect, not untypical of its time. Little was done to develop or protect Jamaica and when a mob of ill-armed and undisciplined Englishmen under Penn and Venables invaded the island in 1655 they met little resistance. The last Spaniard left in 1660, from Runaway Bay; the English conquest was recognised in the Treaty of Madrid (1670).

The Spaniards had introduced sugar to the West Indies from the Canary Islands; this industry is now the bedrock of Jamaica's economy. The plantations, originally worked by slaves in the charge of the usually brutal and corrupt overseers, at first flourished but later were subject to the changes of economic fortune. The early 18th Century was a time of low prices and depression but the slump was shaken off and by 1760 the industry had reached a high point of prosperity. Then, in the middle of the 19th Century came the competition of Cuban sugar and European beet sugar, and a further decline from which the west Indies has never really recovered. Beet sugar production is heavily subsidised for strategic reasons and in any case its refining is now no costlier for the United Kingdom than that of cane sugar at the Commonwealth price, so there is no weapon of cheapness to help the Jamaican planters. Cuban sugar is a strong competitor—75,000 tons were recently sold to Canada and it has an enviable protected market in the United States. West Indies sugar is today about 2% of the world's crop; under the Commonwealth Sugar agreement of 1951—endorsed by the 1953 International Sugar Agreement—the islands are guaranteed an annual export quota of 670,000 tons, sold at a fixed price.

Before the war the United Kingdom and Canada stimulated the expansion of the West Indian sugar industry by granting preferential entry to its exports. This has caused the West Indies production to exceed its agreed world quota, at a time when the marked is already over-stocked. This year Canada and the United Kingdom will be taking all the sugar they need; any Jamaican surplus (expected to be about 50,000 tons) will have to make its own way in the unprotected world market, with no hope of breaking into the United States. This is not an attractive prospect for Jamaica—the world price of sugar has been depressed by the glut and is now considerably lower than the price at which she sells three-quarters of her crop to the United Kingdom.

Other Troubles

Jamaica has other troubles. Her citrus growers are threatened with extinction in face of competition from the USA, Israel and Spain. Her cigar industry has been forced to contract drastically and lay off several hundred workers; this once again due to competition from Cuba. Mr Bustamante, then Jamaica's Chief Minister, came to London in May, 1953, to ask for help for her island's ailing industries and to protest at the financial restrictions which force Jamaica to take 90% of her imports from Britain but forbid her to buy in the cheap dollar markets. A West Indian trade delegation came in May last year to ask for guarantees for their exports of citrus fruits, bananas, rum and cigars. The Colonial Office was firm that " . . . it would not be possible to guarantee a market for the whole of West Indian export crops . . " This lofty refusal from Whitehall is partly due to the restrictions of Imperial Preference which the United Kingdom must enforce as a member of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. For this reason the new government of Jamaica, led by Mr Norman Manley, QC, is opposed to the British Commonwealth's membership of GATT.

Any airline folder or shipping company brochure will show Jamaica as a glamorous tropical island with a history rich in the romance of Spanish treasure galleons, rum-soaked buccaneers and elegant plantation houses kept up by docile, whitely-grinning negroes. The other Jamaica, which the immigrants know, is an island of stark poverty, where 250,000 are unemployed, of a total working force of about 750,000. This is the colony with one of the worst standards of education in the British Empire, whose most troublous diseases are characteristic of its malnutrition and bad housing, hookworm, venereal disease, pulmonary tuberculosis and yaws (a skin complaint bred in dirty huts and carried by flies). Blindness is also a serious problem. Before the war a retired politician called Jamaica an Imperial slum and the description is as apt today; we can hardly blame the Jamaicans if, in the hope that things cannot possibly be worse elsewhere, they trust their luck in emigration.

Restrictions

It is likely that, given the choice, most of the Jamaicans would emigrate to the United States, but they are prevented by that country's strict immigration laws. Restrictions also bar their going to Canada and Australia. England is about the only country which offers freedom of entry and a good chance of a job. With employment easy to find at the present, there is little general resentment against the Jamaicans; this might change if British industry is hit by a slump. Then the Jamaicans would discover that England has as many hardships for them as there are springs in their native island. And, as they already know, it is so much colder.

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