
INTRODUCTION

‘Hot as Hell, and as Wicked as the Devil’

On a voyage to Jamaica, but held at anchor for three freezing days off Deal because of unfavourable winds, Grub Street writer Ned Ward looked around him at his travelling companions. Seeking new opportunities in the West Indies was a decidedly mixed collection of his fellow British countrymen and women. It was January 1697, but it could have been any time between 1630 and 200 years later: the ship’s company was a timeless array of the hopeful, disappointed and desperate. There was a salesman, recently fired; ‘three Broken Tradesmen, who had lost their Credit’; ‘two Parsons, who had lost their Livings; and several, like me’, wrote Ward, ‘who had lost their Wits’. The three women on board consisted of a widow, another woman in pursuit of an errant husband and a ‘maid’ who, ‘I fear, had Lost her self’. The small party of passengers also included a decrepit ship’s captain, an agricultural labourer deported for being caught up in a recent rebellion, and a young Irishman who had been got drunk and then been tricked into servitude on the plantations. All were going, wrote Ward, ‘with one Design, to patch up their Decay’d Fortune’.

At last the vessel, the 400-ton *Andalucia*, weighed anchor and, enjoying a ‘prosperous Gale’, headed steadily westwards down the Channel. Past Land’s End, she steered more southerly. After two weeks, the cold of January in England gave way to a ‘pleasant warmth’. The route to the West Indies followed that taken by Columbus 200 years earlier: south past Portugal and modern-day Morocco, then across the open ocean to Madeira and the Canary Islands, where the vessel could pick up the trade winds blowing towards the Caribbean.

Like the others on board, and the tens of thousands of people who had already travelled to the West Indies colonies before the end of the seventeenth century, Ward, too, wished to patch up his 'decay'd Fortune'; in short, to make money and to reinvent himself as a success, rather than a failure. He was 30, and as a writer, his chosen profession, had made little mark on the world. He was wildly in debt and drinking far too much. What little money he originally possessed had been frittered away in a 'Wilderness of Pleasure and Enjoyment', chatting up women, consuming 'oceans of wine' and gambling with fellow Grub Street hacks. With his creditors closing in, he was now, he resolved, going to shun 'the Company of those who had nothing to do but Spend Money, for the Conversation of such whose practice was to Get it'.

He was heading for the right place, to a society whose guiding principle, perhaps its only principle, was to make money. It was well known in London that Barbados was currently England's richest colony, and Jamaica was on the way to taking over the title. Already, in a short space of time, families such as the Draxes, Codringtons and Beckfords had, from humble beginnings, become immensely, obscenely wealthy, selling the sugar from their plantations manned by enslaved Africans. In consequence, the West Indian islands had become for more than one state the foundation of their commercial and political greatness, and a test bed of national virility. The islands, in the most part minute specks in the sea, had therefore become bitterly contested between the rival great powers of the time, and were already dictating imperial policy.

Sugar itself would shortly become the most important commodity in the world – enjoying a position in the eighteenth century akin to steel in the nineteenth and oil in the twentieth. As a result, the tiny tropical islands became the strategic centre of the Western world, the hinge on which global history turned. Less than a hundred years later, the importance of Jamaica, the size of Yorkshire and smaller than modern-day Connecticut, would contribute directly to the loss by Britain of the North American colonies.

In Ward's time, emigrants from England to the Americas had a choice. But any with ambition for great wealth – or indeed hopelessly in debt – dreamed not of the prosaic settlements on the North American mainland, but of the West Indies. This was the place to get rich quick. As planters, eager for new recruits to the colonies, had been writing from the islands, even the most incorrigible jailbird from England could soon build up a great fortune.

Ned Ward, a professional cynic and wit, considered himself too savvy to believe all of this. He had heard, he wrote, 'extravagant Encomiums of

that Blessed Paradise Jamaica, where Gold is more plentiful than Ice, Silver than Snow, Pearls than Hailstones’.

His disbelieving tone indicates that current in London were other stories of the West Indies: the appalling attrition from a host of unfamiliar diseases; the barbarously sticky heat; the natural disasters; the frightening Carib natives and vengeful slaves; the incessant warfare; the privateers and pirates infesting the sea lanes. In all, the risk, the strangeness, the extreme insecurity.

Ward does not seem to have minded the claustrophobic conditions on board the sailing vessel, his tiny, cramped cabin and the boredom of long weeks at sea. He passed the time playing his flute on deck, to the consternation of the ship’s dog, and gambling at backgammon with one of the parsons. But before the coast of the Old World was out of sight, a fierce storm descended. It was late at night, and it struck a ship’s company that was already unsteady, having been ‘well Moistened’ with ‘an Exhilarating Dose of Right Honourable Punch’. A ferocious wind made standing on deck impossibly perilous, and thunder and lightning was followed by ‘such an excessive Rain, that as we had one Sea under us, we feared another had been tumbling upon our heads’.

The storm raged almost all night, but the next day at first light an even greater danger presented itself. From high aloft, the lookout had spotted a sail bearing down on the *Andalucia*. They were off the coast of Morocco, near a port notorious for its Barbary pirates. The gravity of the situation was made clear to Ward by the speed with which the ship’s crew cleared the decks, readied the 28 guns, distributed firearms and prepared to repel boarders.

As the other vessel neared, they could see that it flew English colours, but this was not trusted, and the *Andalucia*’s captain, by raising and lowering sails, did all he could to give the impression that his ship was better manned than it actually was. Only when the other vessel came into hailing distance was there relief: it was indeed an English ship, on the way to Africa to collect slaves. Ward and his fellow passengers celebrated with more punch.

Soon afterwards, they picked up the trade winds and started across the Atlantic. Around them the sea was empty and the sky enormous, its changing occasional clouds often the only diversion. They were now in the tropics and it was hotter than anything Ward had ever known. Had modesty not forbidden it, he wrote, he would have gone naked on deck. New to him too, were the sharks, turtles, dolphins and flying fish that could be seen from the ship.

The greatest fear now was of being caught in a calm, a situation that

had seen many ships' crews starve to death. But luck was with the *Andalucia*, and after some six weeks at sea, they came in sight of the Leeward Islands gently curving in a chain to the north-west. Passing first Montserrat, then Antigua, Nevis and St Kitts, 'in a few days' they reached Hispaniola. From there, 'with a fresh Gail', it took only 24 hours before they were in sight of Jamaica.

Ward's pithy description of the island has become famous. He was not impressed. To be fair, he arrived in 1697 at a particularly bad time. Jamaica had recently suffered a catastrophic earthquake, and a hugely destructive invasion by a French army, which had laid waste to much of the western half of the island. In addition, it should be remembered that Ward's profession as a Grub Street hack demanded he write with impact, a clever turn of phrase and as much vulgarity as possible.

Jamaica, he wrote, was 'Sweating Chaos'. The climate was deadly: 'As Sickly as a Hospital, as Dangerous as the Plague.' Nature itself was also ill, producing wild disorders such as hurricanes and earthquakes. The food was bizarre and disgusting: the planters' favourite, the spicy Africa-originated pepperpot, was like consuming brandy mixed with gunpowder, 'an excellent Breakfast for a Salamander'; the local 'Cussue' apple was 'so great an Acid . . . that by Eating of one, it drew up my mouth like a *Hens Fundament*'. The pork was 'luscious', but, Ward warned, caused scurvy and leprosy.

Most disgusting of all, though, were the people. The men looked as if 'they had just knock'd off their Fetters'. The women, with nicknames such as 'Salt Beef Peg' and 'Buttock-de-Clink Jenny', were 'such who have been Scandalous in England to the utmost degree, either Transported by the State, or led by their Vicious Inclinations; where they may be Wicked without Shame, and Whore on without Punishment'. Neither sex went in for religion; instead 'they regard nothing but Money, and value not how they get it'. There was no 'felicity to be enjoy'd but purely Riches'. When not trying to get rich, 'They have this Pleasure in Drinking, That what they put into their Bellies, they may soon stroak out of their Finger Ends; for instead of Exonerating, they Fart; and Sweat instead of Pissing.'

This is perhaps a bit rich coming from Ned Ward, a man who had drunk away his twenties and was now himself in Jamaica purely to mend his fortune. Moreover, his lifelong Tory beliefs inform his disgust at the society he encountered on the island. Jamaica, he wrote, had been somehow 'neglected by the Omnipotence when he form'd the World into its admirable Order'. Proper rank and degree, the bedrock of English society, appeared to be absent. Instead, arrivals of whatever hue could be transformed by

the island: 'A Broken Apothecary will make there a Topping Physician; a Barbers Prentice, a good Surgeon; a Balliffs Follower, a passable Lawyer; and an English Knave, a very Honest Fellow.'

The chance for such transformations, or new starts, was, of course, a primary motive for undergoing the dangerous adventure of emigration. The West Indies held out the promise of freedom, of opportunities for social mobility unknown in Europe. The apparent lack of 'order' was exactly what made it so appealing to those on the wrong side of the ancient hierarchy at home. Petty thieves or pirates could indeed become pillars of the colonial establishment. Second or third sons who might otherwise be destined for the priesthood or army could and did find themselves instead at the head of a newly dominant branch of the family. Women who were disgraced or 'lost', by their own fault or that of others, might indeed welcome Ward's snide assertion that 'A little Reputation among the Women goes a great way.'

Ward soon left Jamaica. Although, ironically, his career was transformed by the commercial success of his pamphlet, 'A Trip to the West Indies', published the following year, for him the island was a giant cesspit, inhabited by those beyond redemption: 'The Dunghill of the Universe, the Refuse of the whole Creation . . . The Nursery of Heavens Judgments . . . The Receptacle of Vagabonds, the Sanctuary of Bankrupts, the Close-stool for the Purges of our Prisons, as Hot as Hell, and as wicked as the Devil.'

PART ONE

The Pioneers

WHITE GOLD, 1642

'The great industry and more thriving genius of Sir James Drax.'

John Scott, 1667

On the Drax plantation on the small island of Barbados a secret experiment was taking place. It was some time in 1642 or soon after, by which point much of the land bordering the sea had been cleared and put to work in agriculture: tobacco, cotton, indigo, foodstuffs. But James Drax had established his own plantation away from the coast, in the uplands of St George's, and into that parish's rich red soil, far from prying eyes, he planted a new crop.

James Drax was later described by a contemporary as an 'ingenious spirit'. Certainly, he was fiercely ambitious and fearless, but also well-connected and willing to learn. In around 1640, as every embryonic planter suffered from a collapse of the markets for their Barbadian products, he had set sail to Recife, on the westernmost tip of Brazil, to learn a new technology from the Dutch and Portuguese – sugar. It was not just the techniques of planting that needed acquiring, but also knowledge of the complicated and difficult processes of manufacturing. While taking this all on, James Drax forged invaluable links with local sugar traders and, through them, with Sephardic Jewish merchants and bankers based in Amsterdam, the sugar-refining capital of the world.

Barbados is tiny – 21 miles by 14, with an area close to that of the Isle of Wight. It seems bizarre that the island would prove to be the location for an agricultural revolution almost unrivalled in modern times for its ultimate economic, political and human consequences. Yet Barbados's small size meant that everywhere was within fairly easy reach of the coast, crucial for transport, while its climate and distance from the equator are similar to those of the ancestral home of sugar cane – the islands of New Guinea. Both are hot, around 30°C, humid and wet.

It was in New Guinea that sugar cane, a giant member of the grass family, occurred naturally and was first domesticated. According to local folklore, two New Britain fishermen once found in their net a piece of cane. They threw it away, but recovered it the next day, and the day after that planted it in the earth. The cane burst into life and a woman came forth. She cooked food for the men and at night hid herself in the cane. At last she was captured, and became the wife of one of the men. From their union, the story concludes, sprang the entire human race.

Wild sugar cane had long been valued for the sweet pith that filled the inside of the otherwise bamboo-like reed. It is not hard to imagine a piece of cane, chopped for chewing, being discarded and then sprouting in the rich subtropical soil. From New Guinea, cane cultivation spread westwards, and in around 500 BC it was in India, where the cane also appears in numerous legends, that the juice obtained from crushing the plant was first processed into sugar through being boiled in a succession of ever smaller and hotter cauldrons.

By the sixth century AD, sugar cultivation and processing had reached Persia, from where it was carried into the Mediterranean by the Arab expansion (it was said that sugar followed the Koran). It was grown on Crete, Cyprus and Sicily, as well as the Mediterranean littoral, although the frosts of Europe and the aridity of North Africa made the yield low for the effort involved.

Spanish and Portuguese expansion in the fifteenth century carried the cane ever south-westwards, to warmer, wetter climes. In 1425, Henry the Navigator sent cane plants from Sicily to Madeira with the first Portuguese colonists. After a slow start, the island started producing huge yields. At the end of the century, Spanish colonists, after a long war against the indigenous inhabitants, took possession of the Canary Islands 200 miles further south, and also planted cane.

From the tiny island of Gomera in the Canaries, Christopher Columbus carried cane seedlings to the New World on his second voyage in 1493. Columbus knew sugar: he had traded it between Madeira and Genoa, and his first wife's family had thrived in the business. Thus it was an experienced eye that declared Hispaniola in the West Indies the finest place in the world to grow the crop. In the rich Caribbean soil, the canes Columbus had brought from the Canaries had rooted in seven days and then shot up with astonishingly fast new growth.

The western part of Hispaniola would, 150 years later and under different ownership, become the world's most productive sugar-producing hothouse. But strangely, the Spanish sugar industry on the island flourished only

briefly and then rapidly declined. Along with the favourable reports, Columbus noted that the men brought over to tend the first sugar seedlings had fared less well than their charges. Most were dead by the time the first crop came to harvest. But the wider story of the Spanish failure in the Caribbean to tap the 'white gold' of sugar is more about the particularities of Spanish imperialism, the weaknesses that would soon allow other, less major European powers to muscle in.

For one thing, the mainland colonies, awash with precious metals, proved a stronger short-term draw for adventurers risking their lives gambling against the frightening new diseases of the tropics. In addition, there were monopolies and government interference everywhere in the nascent industry: all produce had to be shipped through Seville; heavy excise duty was charged on imports, which were then only available for purchase to a closed ring of those buyers who had been wise enough to lend money to the profligate emperor of the time. The powerful Church took its chunk of profits in the form of tithes; a monopoly on imported labour did the rest. For a brief time there were 100 sugar factories at work in Spanish Hispaniola; by 1600 there were only 11. This pattern was duplicated around the Spanish Antilles.

Thus developing the industry (and expanding the market) fell to the other nation of great Atlantic explorers, the Portuguese. In the 1490s, the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea were colonised by Portugal and put to cane. When combined with the supply from Madeira, this made Portugal the world's leading sugar producer. The African islands, like Madeira, would for various reasons quickly fade from the picture, but not before they had acted as a nursery of cane technology for the next great expansion. In 1500, Portugal claimed Brazil, and within 20 years had created a huge industry in sugar, initially manned by the indigenous population, then, as it fled or died out, by imported African slaves. Numerous sugar factories were established by the 1520s, and from the 1530s the industry expanded rapidly, particularly around Pernambuco, Olinda and Bahia.

It was a golden period for Brazil. By the end of the sixteenth century, a narrow coastal strip boasted more than 120 sugar mills in what had now become the richest European colony anywhere in the world. James Drax, visiting in around 1640, would have seen all this: the fabulous opulence of the local planters, their tables laden with silver and fine china, their doors fitted with gold locks; the women wearing huge jewels from the East, precious fabrics everywhere and an army of prostitutes and slaves always hovering. A French visitor at the beginning of the seventeenth century has described his visit to a Portuguese sugar baron, who took his lavish meals to the sounds of an orchestra of 30 beautiful black slave girls, presided over by a bandmaster

imported from Europe. All was afloat on a sea of easy profit – the Dutch estimated that in 1620, the Brazilian sugar industry made the equivalent of more than half a million pounds sterling a year, an astonishing figure.

Unsurprisingly, the Dutch, who had emerged after a long struggle against Spanish rule into their Golden Age as Europe's most extensive and successful international traders and bankers, wanted a piece of the action. When, for dynastic reasons, Portugal merged with Spain towards the end of the sixteenth century, her colonies became fair game.

The Dutch West India Company, licensed to make war in search of profits for its backers, was founded in 1621 to get its hands on some of this trade. Three years later, the Company, with a force of 3,300 men and 26 ships under the command of Admiral Piet Heyn, attacked a town on the coast of Bahia. The port's two forts were quickly captured and the defenders dispersed. Driven out the following year, the Dutch returned in 1630, landing 7,000 soldiers at Recife. This time, the hinterland was secured, and soon the Dutch controlled a large area of north-east Brazil.

The conflict had been hugely damaging to the sugar industry, with dozens of factories destroyed in the fighting or to prevent them falling into enemy hands. But new leadership of the Dutch colony from 1636 brought the industry to another high, with hundreds of Dutch merchant ships carrying Brazilian sugar to the refineries of Holland. With the control of Brazil, the Dutch owned the sugar business.

The Dutch leadership successfully encouraged the Portuguese sugar-growers to re-establish their plantations and increase production. But the planters always bridled under the yoke of the hard-working, money-obsessed Calvinist Hollanders. By the early 1640s, cooperation was breaking down and there was agitation in the countryside. This, together with a string of poor harvests during 1642–4 (possibly caused by soil exhaustion in the coastal lands), led the Dutch to look for new sugar acres elsewhere to supply the cargoes for their giant merchant marine and hungry refineries at home. Thus when Drax came knocking in the early 1640s, he found a welcome audience happy to help expand sugar production in the Caribbean basin.

The earliest accounts of Barbados at this time are partial and contradictory. All agree, however, that Dutch influence was crucial in the establishment of the sugar industry on the island in the early 1640s. The actual technology was Portuguese, as the language of the sugar factory – *ingenio, muscovado* – demonstrates. But it was the Dutch, as a 1690 account has it, 'being eternal Prolers about, and Searchers for moderate Gains by Trade', who were the engine of its transfer, as well as offering to provide labour, tools, easy credit, and the ships to carry away the finished sugar. Most early Barbados narratives

also agree on the importance of James Drax, who was about 30 years old at the time. The same 1690 account suggests that ‘a Hollander happened to arrive in Barbados, and . . . was by one Mr Drax, and some other inhabitants there drawn in to make Discovery of the Art he had to make it’.

Drax’s was not the very first sugar to be planted in Barbados. That honour belongs to a Colonel James Holdip. But as an account from around 1667 has it, the colonel’s efforts ‘came to little till the great industry and more thriving genius of Sir James Drax engaged in that great work’.

According to a friend of Drax, bringing the business of sugar growing and processing ‘to perfection’ during the 1640s took ‘divers yeeres paines, care, patience and industry, with the disbursing of vast summes of money’. Drax, an early account maintains, imported from Holland ‘the Model of a Sugar Mill’ for crushing the canes to extract the juice, and some copper cauldrons for boiling the liquid until it was ready to crystallise.

Whatever advice he had received in Recife, along with the infant cane plants, it did not all go to plan at first. Drax, who may have been in partnership with a kinsman, William Hilliard, made several mistakes over the first year or two of his new enterprise. Unlike cotton and tobacco, sugar is difficult and time-consuming to grow, and very tricky to process. It appears that Drax cut his first crop too soon – after 12 months rather than the required 15 or more – and made a mess of the manufacture.

Drax’s first sugar was awful, ‘so moist, and full of molasses, and so ill cur’d, as they were hardly worth the bringing home for England’. But he and his men stuck at it, learning from trial and error, ‘and by new directions from Brazil’. Instead of planting the canes vertically into holes in the ground, they started laying them lengthways in trenches. This anchored the plant and prevented it being blown over on the exposed St George’s hillsides, as well as producing new shoots from each buried knot. The vertical rollers that crushed the cane were strengthened with plates of iron and brass, and the correct boiling sequence was established in copper cauldrons of varying sizes.

As soon as Drax’s first competent Barbados sugar arrived on the London market, it yielded a far higher profit than any other American commodity, fetching as much as £5 per hundredweight. Drax reckoned it increased his income per acre fourfold over any other crop.

The stunning success of his experiment would see James Drax and his heirs – as well as other families – accrue fortunes beyond their wildest dreams. More than that, it would decisively affect the course of history, the fate of empires and the lives of millions. Most immediately, however, it would radically alter the nature of the 15-year-old colony in Barbados.