



Ashford, the estate of Henry Hart in Barbados, drawing from mid 1800s that reflects a typical Barbadian sugar plantation yard of an earlier period

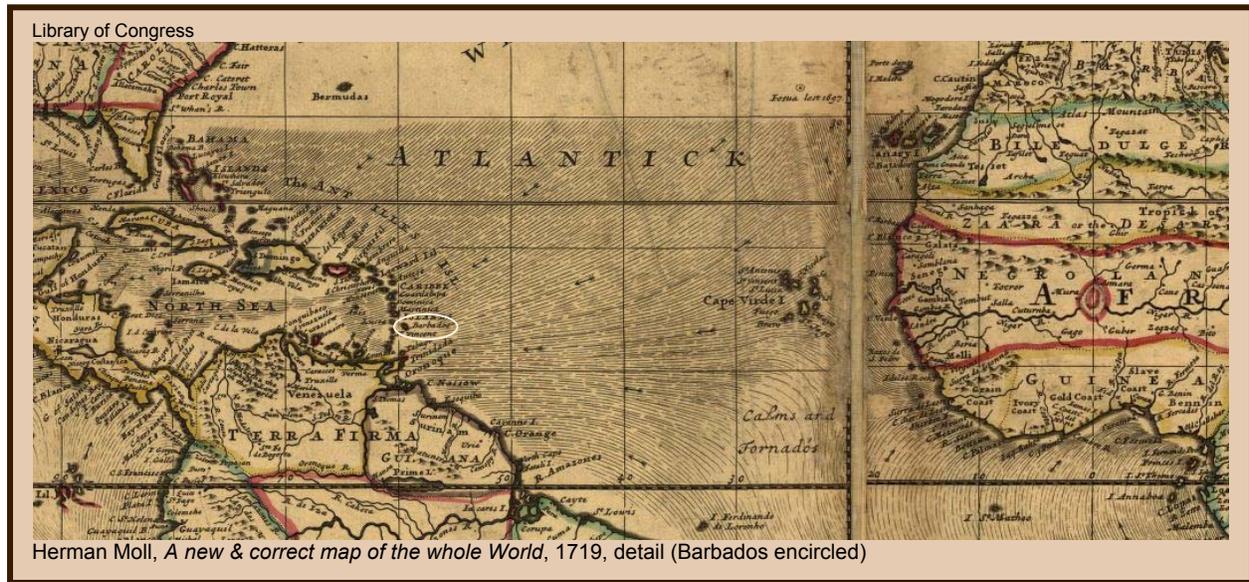
Slavery on the English Island of Barbados

Richard Ligon, *A True & Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes*, 1657, excerpts

In 1627 the first Englishmen landed on the uninhabited Caribbean island of Barbados. Twenty years later, Richard Ligon, a royalist fleeing political turmoil during the English Revolution of 1647-1649, arrived on the island and purchased half of a functioning sugar plantation with several colleagues. He remained on the island for three years, writing *A True & Exact History* after his return to England. In separate sections he describes the masters, servants, and slaves of the island (and the few Indians, usually brought from other islands as slaves). In addition to Ligon's interpretations of the physical and cultural characteristics of the "Negroes," he offers personal experiences to illustrate the master-slave relationships that had evolved on Barbados.

It has been accounted a strange thing that the *Negroes*, being more than double the numbers of the Christians that are there, and they accounted a bloody people where they think they have power or advantages; and the more bloody by how much they are more fearful than others: that these should not commit some horrid massacre upon the Christians, thereby to enfranchise [empower] themselves and become Masters of the Island.

But there are three reasons that take away this wonder; the one is, They are not suffered [allowed] to touch or handle any weapons: The other, That they are held in such awe and slavery as they are fearful to appear in any daring act; and seeing the mustering of our men and hearing their Gun-shot (that which



nothing is more terrible to them), their spirits are subjugated to so low a condition as they dare not look up to any bold attempt. Besides these, there is a third reason, which stops all designs [plans] of that kind, and that is, They are fetch'd from several parts of *Africa*, who speak several languages, and by that means one of them understands not another: For, some of them are fetch'd from *Guinny* and *Binny*, some from *Cutchew*, some from *Angola*, and some from the River of *Gambia*. And in some of these places where petty Kingdoms are, they sell their Subjects and such as they take in Battle, whom they make slaves; and some mean men sell their Servants, their Children, and sometimes their Wives; and think all good traffic [acceptable trade] for such commodities as our Merchants send them. When they are brought to us, the Planters buy them out of the Ship where they find them stark naked and therefore cannot be deceived in any outward infirmity. They choose them as they do Horses in a Market; the strongest, youthfulest, and most beautiful, yield the greatest prices. Thirty pound sterling is a price for the best man *Negro*; and twenty five, twenty six, or twenty seven pound for a Woman; the Children are at easier rates. . . .

During the construction of a roadway as part of public works project, Ligon is questioned about the use of a compass by a slave.

[He] comes to me, and seeing the needle wag, desired to know the reason of its stirring and whether it were alive: I told him no, but it stood upon a point, and for a while it would stir, but by and by stand still, which he observ'd and found it to be true.

The next question was, why it stood one way and would not remove to any other point, I told him that it would stand no way but North and South, and upon that show'd him the four Cardinal points of the compass, East, West, North, South, which he presently learnt by heart, and promis'd me never to forget it. His last question was, why it would stand North, I gave this reason, because of the huge Rocks of Lodestone that were in the North part of the world, which had a quality to draw Iron to it; and this Needle being of Iron, touch'd with a Loadstone, it would always stand that way.

This point of Philosophy was a little too hard for him, and so he stood in a strange muse; which to put him out of, I bade him reach his axe and put it near to the Compass, and remove it about; and as he did so the Needle turned with it, which put him in the greatest admiration that ever I saw a man, and so quite gave over his questions, and desired [asked] me that he might be made a Christian; for, he thought to be a Christian was to be endued with all those knowledges he wanted.

I promised to do my best endeavor; and when I came home, spoke to the Master of the Plantation, and told him that poor *Sambo* desired much to be a Christian. But his answer was, That the people of that Island were governed by the Laws of England, and by those Laws we could not make a Christian a Slave. I told him my request was far different from that, for I desired him to make a Slave a Christian. His answer was, That it was true, there was a great difference in that: But, being once a Christian, he could no

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Skeleton, perhaps of an "Obeah man," (medicine man) wearing metal bracelets on each arm

Newton Plantation cemetery, Barbados



more account him a Slave and so lose the hold they had of them as Slaves by making them Christians; and by that means should open such a gap as all the Planters in the Island would curse him. So I was struck mute, and poor *Sambo* kept out of the Church; as ingenious, as honest, and as good natur'd poor soul, as ever wore black, or eat green. . . .

When any of them die, they dig a grave, and at evening they bury him, clapping and wringing their hands and making a doleful sound with their voices. They are a people of a timorous and fearful disposition, and consequently bloody when they find advantages [opportunities]. If any of them commit a fault, give him present [immediate] punishment, but do not threaten him; for if you do, it is an even lay, he will go and hang himself to avoid the punishment.

What their other opinions are in matter of Religion, I know not; but certainly they are not altogether of the sect of the *Sadduces*¹: For, they believe a Resurrection and that they shall go into their own Country again and have their youth renewed. And lodging this opinion in their hearts, they make it an ordinary practice, upon any great fright or threatening of their Master, to hang themselves.

But Colonel *Walrond*, having lost three or four of his best *Negroes* this way, and in a very little time, caused one of their heads to be cut off and set upon a pole a dozen foot high; and having done that, caused all his *Negroes* to come forth and march round about this head and bid them look on it, whether this were not the head of such an one that hang'd himself. Which they acknowledging, he then told them, That they were in a main error in thinking they went into their own Countries after they were dead; for, this man's head was here, as they all were witnesses of; and how was it possible the body could go without a head. Being convinc'd by this sad yet lively spectacle, they changed their opinions; and after that, no more hanged themselves. . . .

Though there be a mark set upon these people which will hardly ever be wip'd off, as of their cruelties when they have advantages and of their fearfulness and falseness; yet no rule so general but hath his [its] exception: for I believe, and I have strong motives to cause me to be of that persuasion, that there are as honest, faithful, and conscionable people amongst them as amongst those of *Europe* or any other part of the world.

A hint of this I will give you in a lively example; and it was in a time when Victuals [food] were scarce, and Plant[a]ins [similar to bananas] were not then so frequently planted, as to afford them enough. So that some of the high spirited and turbulent amongst them began to mutiny and had a plot secretly to be reveng'd on their Master; and one of two of these were

¹ Hebrew sect (2nd century B.C.–1st century A.D.) that rejected belief in the resurrection of the soul.

Firemen that made the fires in the [sugar] furnaces, who were never without store of dry wood by them. These villains were resolved to make [set] fire to such part of the boiling-house, as they were sure would fire the rest and to burn all, and yet seem ignorant of the fact, as a thing done by accident.

But this plot was discovered by some of the others who hated mischief, as much as they lov'd it; and so traduc'd them to their Master, and brought in so many witnesses against them as they were forc'd to confess, what they meant should have been put in act the next night: so giving them condign [appropriate; deserved] punishment, the Master gave order to the overseer that the rest should have a day's liberty to themselves and their wives to do what they would; and withal to allow them a double proportion of victual for three days, both which they refus'd: which we all wonder'd at, knowing well how much they lov'd their liberties and their meat, having been lately pinch'd of the one and not having overmuch of the

other; and therefore being doubtful what their meaning was in this, suspecting some discontent amongst them, sent for three or four of the best of them, and desir'd to know why they refus'd this favor that was offer'd them, but receiv'd such an answer: as we little expected; for they told us, it was not sullenness, or slighting the gratuity [reward] their Master bestow'd on them, but they would not accept anything as a recompence for doing that which became them in their duties to do, nor would they have him think it was hope of reward that made them to accuse their fellow servants, but an act of Justice which they thought themselves bound in duty to do, and they thought themselves sufficiently rewarded in the Act.

The substance of this, in such language as they had, they delivered, and poor *Sambo* was the Orator; by whose example the others were led both in the discovery of the Plot, and refusal of the gratuity. And withal they said, that if it pleas'd their Master, at any time, to bestow a voluntary boon upon them, be it never so slight, they would willingly and thankfully accept it: and this act might have beseem'd the best Christians, though some of them were denied Christianity when they earnestly sought it. Let others have what opinion they please, yet I am of this belief; that there are to be found amongst them some who are as morally honest, as Conscionable, as humble, as loving to their friends, and as loyal to their Masters, as any that live under the Sun; and one reason they have to be so, is, they set no great value upon their lives: And this is all I can remember concerning the *Negroes*, except of their games, which I could never learn because they wanted [lacked] language to teach me.

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Drax Hall Plantation, Barbados, constructed in the 1650s (photographs, 1970s)

