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# The Initial Formation of Independent Cultural Consciousness in British Colonials in the Caribbean During the Eighteenth Century Through Poetry Written by Colonials in the Caribbean

BY ADAM STILGOE

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The eighteenth century found the British Empire the ruler of the seas and quickly becoming the most powerful nation in the world. Nowhere else was this more evident than its few, but growing, number of Caribbean islands. Populated by poor farmers, adventurers, and hundreds of thousands of slaves, islands such as Barbados and St. Kitts were, in the mid-1700's, concerned with only one thing. Sugarcane was easily the most profitable crop ever to have been grown in the Caribbean by British farmers and it rapidly skyrocketed the extremely poor to the upper middle class and sometimes beyond.

But explaining how a group of people viewed themselves hundreds of years ago proves much more difficult than a simple historic overview. Why did they change, and how quickly did they come to view themselves as a separate people and not as a group of farmers who were still British, but far from home? When did a British-Caribbean identity form, and how did the process continue? These questions must be asked for us to understand the condition and mentality of the Caribbean in the modern day, but it becomes unwieldy when asked alone. Slimming of the overall line of questioning must be done, but a proper medium for answering it is difficult to find in the eighteenth century from island records such as Barbados. Fortunately, men like Samuel Keimer collected poems and records written by Barbadian inhabitants concerning what their island [in a book entitled *Caribbeana*], and islands similarly concerned with growing and selling

sugar cane, were going through in the 1730s and 1740s. And Samuel Grainger, who visited St. Kitts to research the means of producing sugar, returned to Britain with a long Georgic poem concerning it. Both men, unknowingly or not, helped not only to develop our understanding of how life in the British-controlled Caribbean worked, but also brought back to Britain a much better understanding of who colonials in the Caribbean were and the sometimes horrific lifestyle they were living at the time. Grainger especially shows us his thoughts on the British-Caribbean colonists as a separate people, and justly defends their right to remain so, the first and clearest attempt by someone who had traveled to the Caribbean to do so.

Historian Jack P. Greene's essay, "Changing Identity in the British Caribbean: Barbados as a Case Study" could not be better suited for helping identify some of the problems facing the Barbadians in the eighteenth century during the time *Caribbeana* was written, and for helping explicate the problems this thesis deals with. In addition to cataloguing important events from Barbados' settlement by English colonials to its gradual literary rebirth beginning in the 1740s, Greene lays down the fundamental stages through which an English colonial society develops a sense of its own identity, with conclusions that help to shape just why *Caribbeana* was so important, although his eventual end statements are rather too sociological to be of much use to the intellectual interested in literature.

Greene lays down the foundation of building a kind of 'societal consciousness' through four independent steps generally followed by British colonies, especially in the Americas. As we shall see, and as Greene attempts to make clear, Barbados is rather anomalous with regards to the first and last steps, due in large part to its literary contributions to the English-speaking world, a fact Greene quickly glosses over.

The first step that shapes a colony's sense of independent cultural identity refers primarily to the shape and content of

the new landscape where the colonials arrived to build a new life. Islands like Jamaica and the Bermudas were unique in some of their environmental characteristics, which in turn led to colonists coming to a kind of understanding of themselves through their living environment, but the development of colonial identity in Barbados began much more auspiciously. During the first years of settlement Barbadians did not define themselves as a culture almost at all; it was almost entirely created by outside sources, the first but not the last time that outsiders would attempt to mold Barbadians into a people that the colonists knew they were not. Barbados was not considered to be prime territory by the English, who sent colonists there in 1627 after the rest of the European countries had ignored it for over 125 years. There was little in the way of public recognition of the event, as it was not considered a colony of much worth, either economically or otherwise. As with Virginia several years before and the Massachusetts Bay colonies several years later, Barbados slowly filled with farmers seeking a new life, whose primary goal, that of producing enough provisions to feed themselves and to make a small profit from, was admirably acquired in the first fifteen years of its existence as a royal colony. During this time there was little in the way of a colonial or cultural consciousness. Barbadian residents were primarily the people Britain did not want in the home islands. Scots made up the primary group of 'foreigners', while many landless or poor British men and women went to Barbados simply because it was an opportunity to escape poverty. No one felt they were anything more than British locked in a hellish island existence, and consequently the development of cultural consciousness was neither necessary nor expected by anyone. It was only with the arrival of sugarcane that Barbadians truly began to find themselves.

From 1640 to 1670 the sugar trade in Barbados (and throughout the Caribbean, with the French the main rival of the British in sugarcane production) grew exponentially, bringing back to Britain tales of easily-obtained wealth and

drawing adventurers and fortune seekers from around the English world. Although Barbados was tiny, its soil was almost untouched and in a very short time sugar production grew to dominate Bridgetown and every other settlement in Barbados, right down to the individual farmsteads. Sugar was life and death for these people, and unfortunately, it rapidly became death. Adding on to the tremendous difficulties and loss of life of slaves and masters working in the fields under the hot Caribbean sun, the island's "new rich" began purchasing luxury goods that far outweighed their means, disrupting the island's own economy and sending necessary goods plummeting. Very little food other than sugarcane was grown or raised on the island and Barbados suffered considerably as its newly rich inhabitants bought fancy carriages but were unable to afford bread and mutton. Due to poor farming practices and the conversion of every available acre to sugarcane production, the fertility of the soil was rapidly eliminated; Jamaica quickly replaced the smaller, less-fertile Barbados in sugar production, and by 1700 Barbados was in horrific economic decline.

The formation of cultural identity, non-existent before 1640 and the adoption of sugarcane as the main export of the island, was rapidly developed by outsiders. They did not follow the first stage forwarded by Greene, however; instead they created Barbados as an economic, rather than a physical, entity, and Barbadians as sugarcane farmers, and nothing more. While it was certainly clear in the literature produced by writers even somewhat familiar with Barbados that it was indeed a Caribbean island, any descriptions of Barbados began and ended with sugarcane and the means of its agricultural growth. Barbados' population swelled post 1640s with people eager to make a quick fortune once the vast economic potential of sugarcane was discovered, until in Thomas Towne's words, sugarcane became 'the soul of Trade' for the island itself.

With the vast fortunes made by middle and lower-class colonials in Barbados came economic difficulties as well.

Luxury items were purchased non-stop by wealthy Barbadians eager to outdo their neighbors, and with the complete focus on sugarcane production (both to meet export needs and the growing 'need' for luxury goods by the upper class located on the island) animal husbandry and the growing of necessary food crops were badly mistreated and often overlooked. The island's main town, Bridgetown, consisted of poorly built wooden huts and crude stone buildings often destroyed by rain, wind, and the unpredictable Caribbean weather. Likewise the development of music, dramatic performances, and publishable literature slackened during this period; Barbados was rapidly becoming a place of few morals and fewer laws other than fisticuffs and drunken brawling, or so it seemed to outside observers. The idea that Barbados was nothing more than a slovenly refuse pit of scum and villains is perhaps an exaggeration, but Barbadians did little to alleviate this overwhelmingly negative view of themselves in any reasonable fashion; church services continued to be ignored for the most part, laws passed by judges could be revoked or reinstated at any time, and overall 'the sins of Sodom' were thought by outsiders to have descended wholesale on the Barbadian people.

Yet despite negative statements about the abuse of its workforce and the quality of its inhabitants' moral and religious actions and beliefs, Barbados did have some things going for it in the literature back in Britain. Firstly, its large population helped alleviate some concerns held by the British back home; anywhere from 20,000 to 50,000 colonials dwelt in Barbados at any given time between 1640 and 1740, a fact that not only gave Barbados a settled character but also made it particularly defensible; no French or Spanish fleet captain could take Barbados without a costly, major attack, and in the heated days of European wars over the Caribbean, this was a very large plus in Barbados' favor.

Secondly, no one in Britain or elsewhere found Barbados to be anything but beautiful, if only in a well-cultivated, pastoralist sense. By 1670 Barbados was so densely populated

and so devoted to sugar production that the entire 106,000 acres was either cultivated or inhabited, which also lent a more positive aspect to the island in the minds of intellectuals back home. Although this meant that adventure and fortune-seekers could no longer expect to travel to Barbados to 'strike it rich' it did bring Barbados to Greene's second step of forming a cultural colonial identity; that of colonists defining themselves by how they organized their social and cultural landscapes and how those landscapes did or did not conform to how such landscapes should be. By creating a kind of 'garden isle' Barbados lost its natural beauty and gained cultivated, and therefore (by British standards) improved beauty instead. Combining a fully formed parish system and improving its standard of living as best it could, Barbadians up to 1700 began to improve the world's view of them slowly but steadily. Unfortunately, this was not to last.

Barbadians suffered numerous setbacks to their development of a positive cultural identity from around 1680 to 1730. The exhaustion of their beautiful island's soil disintegrated that positive facet: in light of the decline of the soil, the island's economy suffered as well, bringing about a mass exodus of colonials to other, newer British colonies. Jamaica continued to outperform the sugar-growers of Barbados as well. Coupled with a major epidemic of yellow fever just before the turn of the century, Barbados lost a good deal of its population and therefore its 'settled' look, a major factor in garnering a positive image back home. The threat and arrival of devastating hurricanes and further outbreaks of disease ground down the settler's images of themselves, as did a long string of corrupt governors placed in Barbados by an unwary or uncaring Britain. Out only to make a profit, these governors, with a few exceptions, were corrupt, dishonest, and completely uninterested in improving the Barbadian way of life, be it through development of infrastructure or the island's cultural mores. Parliament's imposition of a new set of duties on sugarcane production came at exactly the wrong time for Barbados, and plunged its economy into recession.

While Barbados complained, the British government did nothing to alleviate this island that, to its officials, was nothing more than a means of garnering revenue. In the eyes of Europe, and especially Britain, Barbadians were not a separate culture, but rather 'commanded as subjects, and...crusht as Aliens' in the words of Edward Littleton. Barbadians rapidly became a subpar society, not fully citizens in British eyes and seemingly unable to break free of this stigma. The normal means available to the public at large (as the governors were almost completely indifferent) might have rested in defending themselves through intellectual means: poetry, plays, or other forms of literary expression would present a unique and innovative intellectual front. What common cultural identity there was failed to meet this challenge, burdened through the ever-present stigma from the homeland, the danger of living in such a climate, and the overwhelming sense of being inferiority.

Grainger makes mention of slavery in a different light than usual, although he is not alone among poets of his time in his viewpoints. He reminds his readers that "Howe'er insensate some may deem their slaves, Nor 'bove the bestial rank; far other thoughts the muse, soft daughter of humanity! Will ever entertain. – The Ethiop knows, the Ethiop feels, when treated like a man; Nor grudges, should necessity compel, By day, by night, to labour for his lord." Grainger then goes on to make a very interesting point that shows he has learned more in the Caribbean than the first parts of his poem let on. He muses,

"Yet, planter let humanity prevail. –  
Perhaps thy Negroe, in his native land  
Possess large fertile plains, and slaves, and herds:  
Perhaps, whene'er he deign'd to walk abroad,  
The richest silks, from where the Indus rolls,  
His limbs invested in their gorgeous pleats:  
Perhaps he wails his wife, his children, left  
To struggle with adversity: Perhaps

Fortune, in battle for his country fought,  
 Gave him a captive to his deadliest foe:  
 Perhaps, incautious, in his native fields,  
 (On pleasurable scenes his mind intent)  
 All as he wandered; from the neighbouring grove,  
 Fell ambush dragg'd him to the hated main. –  
 Were they even sold for crimes; ye polish'd, say!  
 Ye, to whom Learning opes her amplest page!  
 Ye, whom the knowledge of a living God  
 Should lead to virtue! Are ye free from crimes?  
 Ah pity, then, these uninstructed swains;  
 And still let mercy soften the decrees  
 Of rigid justice, with her lenient hand.  
 Oh, did the tender muse possess the power;  
 Which monarchs have, and monarchs oft abuse:  
 'Twould be the fond ambition of her soul,  
 To quell tyrannic sway; knock off the chains  
 Of heart-debasing slavery; give to man,  
 Of every colour and every clime,  
 Freedom, which stamps him image of his God,  
 Then laws, Oppression's scourge, fair Virtue's prop,  
 Offspring of Wisdom! Should impartial reign,  
 To knit the whole in well-accorded strife:  
 Servants, not slaves; of choice, and not compell'd;  
 The Blacks should cultivate the Cane-land isles.

Grainger's information about the practice of slavery here is quite extensive. He is aware not only of other Africans' methods of finding slaves to sell to Europeans but even considers aloud the past lives of these Africans reduced to endless toil in the fields of sugar cane. "Above the bestial rank" indeed, perhaps; but what prevents Sugar Cane from being a simple economic handbook, and slaves from being just a gear in Grainger's *ingenio*?

His words are outspoken and direct, putting British and fellow colonials in a compromising position. Grainger,

like Virgil, spends no time dodging around the point here, although guilty of such practice in his first three books at times. Those who ignore his words are going against his muse (and therefore against the higher laws of the universe) and have, in a sense, gone against the Biblical saying, "If your slate is clean, then you may throw stones" suggesting that they may have acquired a slave sold to them via improper means. It gives slaves not only a background life (something rarely considered by British subjects then) but also something of a questionable social status; their slave could have been noble or wealthy or both. This is coupled with the idea of what many assumed to be a kind of animal "wail his wife, his children, left to struggle with adversity," giving the African slave compassion and devotion to the "civilized" idea of marriage as an unbreakable bond. Grainger also moves that the slave's capture might not have been on the field of combat, and therefore quasi-legitimate due to its correlation with ancient Roman practices, but was, "Perhaps, incautious, in his native fields, (On pleasurable scenes his mind intent) All as he wandered; from the neighbouring grove, Fell ambush dragg'd him to the hated main. – Were they even sold for crimes; ye polish'd, say!" The idea of a slave kidnapped from an African eden both beautiful and pleasurable by an ambushing pack of thieves only to be taken to the ocean and sold to white slavers for no reason other than the economy of the action is repulsive to anyone, and has to make the eighteenth century reader stop and think, at least. The word "polish'd" here is sarcastic and meant to offend. Grainger's knowledge of how the slave trade works allows him to blame Europeans for expanding the slave trade to worldwide proportions to devastating effect.

Following this preliminary accusation Grainger attacks Europeans full-force, telling them that as Christians and technologically advanced people they should therefore be intelligent and virtuous; saying, "are ye free from crimes" cannot have a positive or affirmative answer for Europeans, as Grainger presents them. The lines, "Ah pity, then, these

uninstructed swains;/ And still let mercy soften the decrees /Of rigid justice, with her lenient hand," offer an insight into what Grainger thought; his audience does not need to answer his question about their accountability, because their actions have already spoken for them. He tells his audience to pity the slaves because Europeans, as masters, have a responsibility both to instruct and be merciful.

This leads to an interesting situation in Grainger's writing about slavery. The remainder of this section is quite clearly anti-slavery:

Oh, did the tender muse possess the power;  
Which monarchs have, and monarchs oft abuse:  
'Twould be the fond ambition of her soul,  
To quell tyrannic sway; knock off the chains  
Of heart-debasing slavery; give to man,  
Of every colour and every clime,  
Freedom, which stamps him image of his God,  
Then laws, Oppression's scourge, fair Virtue's prop,  
Offspring of Wisdom! Should impartial reign,  
To knit the whole in well-accorded strife:  
Servants, not slaves; of choice, and not compell'd;  
The Blacks should cultivate the Cane-land isles.

As an avatar of Grainger's thought, his muse's wish to abolish slavery in all its forms – "give to man, of every colour and every clime, Freedom" – is obviously his own. But the word "monarch" seems strangely out of place here. Every man is not a king, and certainly few farmers with one or two slaves felt themselves to be one, although in effect a slave had no rights against his master no matter who he was. Nevertheless the word is a strange one, especially in a time of royal divinity. Grainger suggests a monarch in Wisdom, rather than a human one, to enact laws enabling blacks (and, strangely, whites) to come to the Caribbean freely to settle as servants and, "not compell'd", nevertheless work for their white master. Although this quote can be

seen as an attempt to justify slavery on moral grounds, previous lines have shown that this is not Grainger's intent. He despises slavery enough to attack his fellow Europeans over its prevalence and use, so he cannot be justifying it here. I propose that, because Grainger knows he cannot abolish slavery, he suggests a kind of "first step" towards fixing the problem by making Africans servants, who even then had the opportunity to advance their station and lot in life through hard work and diligence. Certainly it is not the same as freeing all slaves in the world, but it would have been a good start; most importantly, it shows that Grainger has not yet descended into fanciful longing as many poets do, but is keeping his Georgic instructional even in the face of philosophical dissent.

Yet even this particularly liberal view of slavery is not Grainger's main topic of discussion here. The second half of the above excerpt can be read out of context with slavery, whereupon it acquires a very different, and to Grainger a very dangerous meaning. As previously mentioned, the men and women on the sugar cane islands had a very short life expectancy no matter who they were or what they did; and as many British subjects and bureaucracy members assumed, these "sub-par British citizens" were only good for one thing – growing sugarcane. British colonials were of course furious with this representation, and while they sought to change it via political means, Grainger takes a very potent step here by disseminating this anger throughout the British isles through poetry. Taken in context, it appears that Grainger is bemoaning the condition of slaves in the British Caribbean colonies in the excerpt above. But beginning with the line, "Are ye free from crimes?" the rest of the excerpt can be, and should be, seen as a defense not only of African slaves but of the near-slavery suffered by Caribbean colonials. Grainger's muse would destroy tyrannic power, 'so oft abused' by granting 'to man / of every colour and every clime, Freedom' – freedom from abuse, freedom from a deadly work environment designed solely to support

the British empire, and freedom from political hexes that infringed on the quality of life on the island. Grainger not only feels that blacks should be treated better as a general rule in the Caribbean but also that they “should cultivate the Cane-land isles,” a clear indication that slaves, and not British farmers, should be living and dying for the sugarcane the British empire was so dependent upon. Although he does not immediately offer a rejoinder to this (instead touching upon the subject of removing tapeworms from slaves) the final stanza of his poem, does, with an even more profound moment of separation of interest – the poem’s clearest mark of traversing Greene’s steps.

The last stanza of “Sugar Cane” assumes an almost apocalyptic air; one is reminded less of the Caribbean and more of the Christian Book of the Revelation of John as Grainger ends his poem with power and a stunningly perceptive message.

Ah me, what thunders roll! The sky’s on fire!  
 Now sudden darkness muffles up the pole!  
 Heavens! What wild scenes, before the affrighted sense,  
 Imperfect swim! – See! In that flaming scroll,  
 Which Time unfolds, the future germs bud forth,  
 Of mighty empires! Independent realms! –  
 And must Britannia, Neptune’s favorite queen,  
 Protect’ress of true science, freedom, arts;  
 Must she, ah! Must she, to her offspring crouch?  
 Ah, must my Thames, old Ocean’s favourite son,  
 Resign his trident to barbaric streams;  
 His banks neglected, and his waves unsought,  
 No bards to sing them, and no fleets to grace?  
 Again the fleecy clouds amuse the eye,  
 And sparkling stars the vast horizon gild –  
 She shall not crouch; if Wisdom guide the helm,  
 Wisdom that bade loud Fame, with justest praise,  
 Record her triumphs! Bade the lacquaying winds  
 Transport, to every quarter of the globe,

Her winged navies! Bade the scepter’d sons  
 Of earth acknowledge her pre-eminence! –  
 She shall not crouch; if these Cane ocean-isles,  
 Isles which on Britain for their all depend,  
 And must for ever; still indulgent share  
 Her forstering smile: and other isles be given,  
 From vanquish’d foes. – And, see, another race!  
 A golden aera dazzles my fond sight!  
 That other race, that long’d for aera, hail!  
 The British George now reigns, the Patriot King!  
 Britain shall ever triumph o’er the main.

Two methods of interpreting the previous lines are possible. The first is the economic “pre-eminence” of the British Empire in the eighteenth century holding tight to its sovereignty with an iron fist based out of the Thames, the river sought after by every merchant vessel in Europe and much of the rest of the world. Grainger’s words of warning and apocalypse – “the sky’s on fire!” and, “the thunders roll” – mark the beginning of the passage as something to be feared by his readers. “Independent realms” of a “barbaric” nature are given to rise in the future, the “future germs...of mighty empires” are a threat to the Thames, which Grainger laments may have to “resign his trident to barbaric streams,” rivers elsewhere in the world that lead to the capitols of other empires besides Britain’s. But, Grainger replies to the fear now in his reader’s mind, if the British empire works intelligently, with “Wisdom” guiding her, then “Britain shall ever triumph o’er the main”, and “she shall not crouch” to these alien, barbaric empires. The poet hopes that Fame will “transport, to every quarter of the globe, her winged navies” and have “the scepter’d sons of earth acknowledge her pre-eminence,” giving Britain an almost angelic personification, one destined by God to rule the earth and the “Cane ocean-isles” that “on Britain for their all depend, and must for ever.” At first glance, then, the ending of *Sugar Cane* appears to be simply a pro-expansionist, pro-British piece and little more.



Grainger is thus characterized as someone solely interested in economic development of St. Kitts and islands similar to it, a fiscal-minded slavedriver whose sole goal through the writing of this Georgic is to instruct others in keeping slaves and making profit.

The above analysis avoids, however, what else has been discussed in *Sugar Cane* with the ease offered by a quick glance. Grainger has already written about Wisdom, degrading his fellow Englishman through their improper treatment of slavery and its victims, urging them to be virtuous and to act as the world's most highly developed civilization and not like barbarians. Grainger's view of the world coming to an end through the development of independent realms is not meant to be solely viewed as other countries splitting up and conquering one another; Grainger speaks of India and Argentina and Britain's countless other territories, including the Caribbean, breaking away because of their enslavement to the British empire through mercantilism and harsh parliamentary laws designed to keep them subdued. He foresees every race in the world rising up against a harsh oppressor which is in this case a Britain without Wisdom

guiding the helm. As he sees it Britain is an empire solely focused on making money, and not with virtue or cultural development or the fair treatment of its subjects. We have already seen how Barbados and other islands growing sugar cane were under the thumb of the British empire. Grainger entreats Britain to function as a wise and benevolent ruler rather than a despot or a power-hungry monarch, visualizing a country ruled by such things being acknowledged for its pre-eminence among all the people of the world. The Caribbean islands owned by Britain he sees as constantly dependent on Britain for their livelihood, and in this period of history they undoubtedly were. But, if Britain were to recognize what Grainger does, that Barbados, Jamaica, St. Kitts, and their fellow islands and inhabitants represented a culture of their own that was more concerned with breaking their chains and reacquiring their right to exist as first-class British citizens, *Sugar Cane* feels that the British empire would constitute another race surrounded by a golden halo: a heaven on earth, devoid of slavery and submission and destined to become the world's greatest wonder.

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