GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The decade of the 1930s surely constituted the nadir of the whole European imperial project. The Great Depression after 1929 seemed to represent the failure of the Western capitalism which had underpinned the entire economic structure of the imperial relationship. That massive cyclical downturn in a globalised world economy helped to produce major social stresses, strikes and riots in many parts of the world, including African colonies and, of course, the West Indies. These years also saw the maturation of a new indigenous political class, securing an education on a transnational basis and becoming increasingly alert to world movements that combined economic, political and cultural content. This generation was galvanised by the growing evidence of the moral bankruptcy of a world system which was reflected in an imitative Japan invading Manchuria and creating conflicts in other parts of the Chinese mainland. But above all, it was the Italian invasion of Abyssinia which produced outraged reactions from Indian, African, West Indian and black American activists. Here was what seemed like the oldest state in black Africa, the bearer of all sorts of cultural and spiritual messages, now overwhelmed by the forces of Mussolini's fascism. This was all the more bitter an experience because it was Abyssinia, which, almost uniquely in Africa had repulsed European aggression in the 1890s, defeating the Italians in the battle of Adua.

It is not surprising then that Mary Chamberlain starts her study of the decline of Caribbean colonialism, the rise of nation-building and the seeds of decolonisation (not necessarily the same things, as she points out) in this key decade. The riots and other aspects of social disorder, stimulated both by poverty and by the assault upon the dignity and the right to decent lives of Barbadians, together constituted a serious insurrection from which the end of empire in the region was ultimately to flow. Barbados was a key case for a number of reasons: it had been effectively under a form of white planter power for several centuries. Alleged over-population ensured that there was no shortage of labour, helping to push wages down below a reasonable level of subsistence. There was similarly no excess of land, so squatting was not an option. Barbadians were trapped in an economic, social and political order which denied them the dignity of a reasonable life. Some found escape through migration until these opportunities were largely cut off, notably in the 1920s. A few managed to escape into education over-

seas. But the lot of most involved being tied to plantations or in slums with few opportunities for educational, and therefore social, cultural and economic, advancement.

Yet, as Chamberlain demonstrates, Barbadians maintained a sense of identity. They developed distinctive cultural forms (to be greatly enhanced during and after the Second World War) and survived through mutual help in a moral economy of the poor. In all of these respects, women played crucial roles. As well as being in the majority in a notable gender imbalance, they effectively maintained the co-operative systems which held families, villages and slums together. Women also helped to sustain a unique local culture, including West Indian forms of Christian worship. Even if trade union and political opposition, the establishments of a black Atlantic culture in contacts with the USA, other Caribbean islands, Europe, and Africa seemed to be largely a male preserve, women were at the centre of the nation-building process. Once the franchise was extended to them, they became fully involved in political processes.

Chamberlain develops these and other themes through the crucial years of recession, war and imperial retreat. She also illuminates the often tortuous political processes through which ideas of a West Indian Federation rose and fell. Barbadians and others needed to consider their identities as black people adhering to a wider sense of ethnicity, as West Indians enjoying a regional sense of belonging, and as Barbadians seeking their salvation through more local efforts. They also had to grapple with the jockeyings of the British and the Americans, and other developments in the hemisphere, including the emergence of a Communist Cuba. These complex strands have been revealed through extensive and innovative research in archives in Britain, the United States and, most importantly, in the West Indies. But above all, personal testimonies and narratives have been used to tremendous effect to indicate how ordinary people reacted to and influenced these seismic developments influenced by global changes.

This book should be of interest not only to those interested in Caribbean history, and that of Barbados in particular, but also everyone concerned with processes of nation-building, of the formation of cultural identities and of the decline of empires.

John M. MacKenzie