

## **A Caribbean Quest for the Muse of History**

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Until I entered the university I did not even know that being a historian could be classified as a useful occupation. I had never seriously thought about what historians really did, although all through my high school students took a specialized course in history. I read history the same way I read novels as a sort of diversion that exercised the imagination and occasionally provided grist for reflection on world affairs. Both history and literature, however, required at their best a superb use of language. I liked creative writing and I liked foreign languages. The nearest I came during my teenage years in high school to defining a vocation was a fleeting fancy to become a creative writer or a translator of poetry. Two of my teachers were published novelists and in the upper school many of my friends and I fancied that we would be great writers or poets. Our notion of great, however, was probably restricted to occasional publication in the leading daily newspaper. I wrote a lot of imaginary material for the high school newspaper that I edited for a time, and I translated from Spanish the entire volume of Rimas of Gustavo Adolfo Becquer. I really liked the idealistic romanticism of Becquer as well as the sonorous solemnity of his Spanish. Nevertheless, the idea of being a full time professional writer never appealed to me strongly, and in any case, I never discussed the prospect with anyone.

Indeed, as far as I can recall, no one ever discussed my career prospects and neither did I think much about that. That may probably be the case with the

majority of children, not only those who turn out to be historians. I cannot recall my parents asking me what I wanted to do as an adult. But then my parents never spoke about what happened when their children were no longer dependent offspring. Vocational aptitude simply did not form part of the repertoire of childhood discussions for me. None of the teachers I had in elementary or secondary school talked about what I wanted to be later in life, although their range of conversation was wider than that of my parents. That was hardly surprising. There were lots of things that never entered the conversations between the important adults in my life and me. Nobody talked about sex or any of the interesting subjects that occupy young minds. It was simply assumed that we would grow up eventually and, if we could, do something useful. The assumption, I suppose, was that a good education would eventually resolve all the problems of adolescence and adulthood so my parents strove to provide all their children with the best education available.

But even had vocational interests been specifically discussed, I strongly doubt that my parents would have considered becoming a historian an attractive or wise proposition. History, to them, was what some people did in their leisure time. In my family desirable professions were narrowly restricted to medicine, law, teaching, or as in the case of my father, the government bureaucracy. Only teaching of all those options faintly appealed to me in my youth.

Looking back now after all these years I realize that I simply muddled through life aided by a series of fortuitous circumstances that led me to a career in history. My formal and informal education was profoundly influenced by time,

place and circumstances as it is for all. In my case I am the product of a late British Caribbean colonial society and the commingling of a British and United States higher education. The confident but undisciplined impetuosity of my youth slowly matured in college and university into a reflective individual with a broader and more complex world view. Nevertheless, I became a historian through repeated coincidences, then, rather than by directed vocational attraction.

Growing up in Jamaica at the middle of the twentieth century was part of my good fortune. The period between the late 1940s and the early 1970s were halcyon years for the island. The British government poured a lot of resources into education both at home as well as overseas in the empire and I was a beneficiary of that largesse. The curriculum was obviously British-biased in a number of ways but academic selection was made on merit and there were no special categories. Everyone regardless of color, class, or condition had to sit the eleven-plus examination, the prerequisite for entrance to any of the island's secondary schools. The competent, and this was especially crucial in the colonies, could make it on their own. Considerations of race and class were not manifest in decision-making. Neither during my high school nor university years did I experience the negative consequences of race and colonialism that strongly permeate the writings of Frantz Fanon, or Albert Memmi or Octave Manoni.

British colonialism did not scar all of my generation for a number of reasons. By the time we came to maturity after the Second World War, Great Britain had lost viability as an imperial power along with its self-confidence. British political and economic influence throughout the Caribbean was waning

and everywhere locals were taking over. Certainly in Jamaica where blacks comprised the overwhelming majority of the population there was not any obvious inferiority complex among that sector of the population. On the contrary, color was subordinate to class in many social situations and most schools tried very hard to negate those differences. My high school peers and I confidently felt that we could accomplish anything we wanted to be in our society. No one had to tell me that. Like the character, Jackson Philip in Derek Walcott's Pantomime, I felt that the roles in life were not circumscribed by race, color or colonial condition. Racism, however, was not a major issue for most young people at that time and Caribbean political discourse was not yet infected by the North American race-conscious rhetoric of the civil rights movement. But at no time in my early youth did I recall being politically active. I was entirely a product of my time, politically indifferent until I entered the university.

For anyone born during or immediately after the Second World War the times were especially propitious. This was true everywhere but even more in the British Caribbean. The second half of the twentieth century was quite unusual. I could never understand, and still refuse to accept the contrary idea expressed in 1997 by American Historical Association president Joyce Appleby that "it is the conceit of all contemporaries to think theirs is a time of particularly momentous changes." The record is clear for anyone to see. During the 1950s momentous changes were definitely taking place across the Caribbean. The Puerto Ricans were crafting a dynamic form of colonialism that fundamentally transformed both their island and its political relations with the United States. The Cubans

embarked on a revolution that would eventually rank among the most profound in the history of the world. Winds of change were moving across the British, French and Dutch Antilles too affecting all levels of Caribbean life although obviously not to the same degree everywhere or to everyone equally. It was also a time of incredible technological changes and I lived through those tumultuous times. The saturating presence of radio and the emerging medium of television meant that increasingly the world was truly becoming a global village.

The decades-long rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union indelibly colored all sorts of relations in societies that had nothing to do with the conflict. Jamaica was inescapably caught up in the wake of the Cuban revolution led by Fidel Castro ninety miles away during the late 1950s. The Cuban revolution was an integral component of my intellectual maturation, as it was for generations of young people around the world. My initial interest in Cuba was derived, however, less from the ongoing revolution that none of us teenagers really understood than from the sensational and sometimes salacious pictures carried in Bohemia magazine that we shared surreptitiously in my all-male boarding school, compliments of the few Cuban exile students who also attended.

It was very easy to capture the sense of viewing history unfold in the Caribbean of the 1950s. Enormous local changes were taking place independent of the internationally recognized Cuban revolution. Even before that event, Luis Muñoz Marín was dramatically transforming the island of Puerto Rico through his progressive department of development in a process that came to be called

“Operation Bootstrap.” The Puerto Rican events were headline news in Jamaica and discussed even in my household. My father and his friends talked a lot about Muñoz but I was never a party to their conversations. The French and Dutch Antilles were adjusting to their new political statuses, but that got far less press in the British West Indies. In 1946 Martinique, Guadeloupe and French Guiana (along with Réunion in the Indian Ocean) became French Overseas Departments, losing their administrative designation as tropical colonies. In 1954 The Netherlands Antilles gained associate status with their metropolis, Holland. The British West Indies began to implement universal adult suffrage in competitive local elections across the British Caribbean colonies beginning with a general election in Jamaica in 1944. This calculated move toward internal self-government presaged the eventual disintegration of the British Empire in the Caribbean. Anxious to relieve itself of the Caribbean territories then past their glory days, the British government encouraged the formation of a federal structure. Ten units joined together in an ill-fated federation in 1958 but by May 1962 that construct dissolved itself in dismal and acrimonious failure. The federal elections constituted my first foray into politics and forced me to learn a lot about the rest of the English-speaking Caribbean and I would tour the region during my first year in college.

The development of the United Nations in the late 1940s also had an appreciable impact on Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean. Although the domination of the United States deeply marred the development and performance of the newly established United Nations, its organization was big

news in Jamaica. Parents of my high school colleagues worked for some fledgling agencies of the United Nations across Latin America and brought it to our attention. If the United Nations was quite familiar to us the important international monetary and financial institutions created to facilitate the reconstruction of the West after World War II escaped our attention, or was deeply overshadowed by the Cold War conflict between East and West. I was born during the Second World War and so have no recollection of that great global undertaking. My earliest consciousness of events of the wider world beyond my island home probably began with the Korean War, remembered patchily as large maps on the front page of the principal daily newspaper of the island. I cannot recall reading the reports (although I could read at that time) but do recall vividly that the war stimulated rather excited discussions among the adult acquaintances of my father. The cancellation of the new constitution of British Guiana (now Guyana) in 1953 also made the news and agitated the adult gatherings at my home since everyone was convinced that the Guyanese were turning communist. That alone, to them, justified the British action.

Yet I was too young to understand the importance of wars or communist threats, or revocations of colonial constitutions. That was of interest to the adults. I was more interested in the repeated showing in local cinemas of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, new shorts about the independence of Ghana, and the cricket tests between Australia and the West Indies. The coronation was advertised as “brought to you in living color,” a phrase that still remains a puzzle to me. The independence of Ghana and the cricket matches played outside the

Caribbean formed part of newsreels shorts shown repeatedly before feature events. International cricket matches transmitted by radio from Australia to the West Indies in the middle of the night local time in the Caribbean reinforced the reality of the relativity of time and the enormity of distance. England was only six hours difference from Jamaica. Australia was almost a full day ahead. These realizations were never lost on me and would eventually become important dimensions of my later historical consciousness. In my world relativity did not automatically connote hierarchy.

Other factors were surreptitiously influencing me throughout my youth. Urbanization was rapidly transforming the city of Kingston. Between 1955 and 1960 – the years I spent at a boarding school in the suburban foothills — the city limits moved out and engulfed many formerly isolated localities. Housing developments became a regular feature of the urban expansion in every direction and the city was gradually modernized before our eyes. Buses replaced electric streetcars and increased inter-urban mobility. A favorite pastime of my friends and me on Sunday afternoons when we were allowed out of school was to ride various buses along their entire routes. This reinforced the changes that were taking place at the time. Colorful new shopping centers overwhelmed small individual entrepreneurs and undermined the itinerant peddlers who were a fond recollection of my high school days.

Clearly not everyone at the time would have been conscious of history in the making. But even in my small Caribbean island there was a tremendous awareness of something ominously imminent not just locally but internationally

and I recall the events as fleeting, unconnected episodes of an interesting time. There was a pervasive sentiment of an uncontrollable onrush of overwhelming events like the perennial Caribbean hurricanes that nullified individual national readiness with an exhilarating destructiveness. Caribbean hurricane seasons, for those who live in the region, provide important general lessons in geography, civics and politics. They temporarily reduce insularity and accentuate the urgent need for cooperative action despite ingrained political and linguistic differences. Any neighbor in distress instantly became a friend in need and it was unimportant that the neighbor spoke a different language or had a different political system, or was oriented to a different European (or North American) country. At least that was the prevailing local Caribbean view during my childhood. We were never narrowly insular in our perspectives. Moreover the reality of our daily lives was anything but parochial. From a very young age I can recall listening frequently to adults who had returned from distant lands with fascinating stories. Travel and global awareness were part and parcel of my childhood world. Jamaicans of my generation, as my teenaged peers throughout the region, minded in such a cosmopolitan world.

For most prominent Jamaicans, their high school experience constituted the formative experience that merits attention in their biographies. This was certainly so in my case. At age twelve I was sent as a boarding student to Calabar High School, where I spent six years that truly prepared me for an adult life, although not necessarily for a career in history. Run by the British Baptists, the curriculum followed the conventional English model so it was not strange that

important local events were never discussed by any of my teachers, although we had a regular class in current affairs. But the quality of instruction was excellent and great emphasis was placed on thinking and expressing one's self. All examinations were essay type and the simple, not to mention the simplistic, answer was frowned upon. We were taught to see the world as a complex collection of peoples whose trajectory was anything but linear.

We were not especially inquisitive not intellectually curious. We took everything for granted then, as young adults are sometimes wont to do. I now realize that the school was not only academically exceptional but also remarkably cosmopolitan. It had teachers from England, Scotland, Canada, Jamaica, Barbados, Panama, Belize and Cuba. Some teachers had degrees from some of the most prestigious universities in the British Isles, Canada or the United States. Others were graduates of the recently opened University College of the West Indies. We treated their qualifications all the same, although our English teachers tended to exalt their own degrees. A few teachers, such as the Canadian-born prize-winning novelist John Hearne, already had an international reputation in their field. The students came from Australia, the Bahamas, Belize, Bermuda, Cuba, and Venezuela. This rich diversity inculcated an essential plurality to the world that would become normal in my intellectual formation. At Calabar I learned that, in the phrase of Rudyard Kipling, one could talk with crowds and not lose one's virtue; and walk with kings and not lose the common touch. Almost astonishing, there was never any overt racial incident. Neither did the school experience discussions, heated or otherwise, about race, color and class

divisions or of world affairs outside the British Empire. Team sports were a big part of student life but one belonged to several teams involving an ever widening circle of teammates. Enduring friendships were easily made across lines of native language, race, class and nationality. For its part the school operated as though such distinctions were irrelevant. Of course they were not; but postponing the confrontations provided an opportunity for increased maturity.

My Calabar experience pre-conditioned me for the demands of studying history at the university. Calabar was a school that enjoyed a reputation for stressing the basics of a good general education, at a time and in a society where education was given inordinately high social value. I was a quiet but good student. I played several sports, as did all students, and excelled at track. I was promising at soccer, cricket, and field hockey and indifferent at most of the others. I was given responsibility at an early age becoming a school prefect and deputy head boy. The boys under my charge were not troublesome and in those times the most serious delinquencies had to do with tardiness and leaving the school grounds without prior permission. Being a school prefect meant that one had frequent contacts with the teaching staff and had to explain school policy to fellow students as well as newly hired teachers. The sixth forms, with students aged seventeen and above, offered the equivalent of an American junior college curriculum.

There was not, however, any coordinated preparation for higher education – simply a prevailing assumption that all sixth formers would continue to university (preferably in the British Isles) and continue to do well there. The

school had no counselors of any kind. No one overtly mentioned occupational role models, or discussed professional careers, or emphasized the importance of public service. The school had a well-substantiated confidence in the general adequacy of its preparation although no one knew precisely how that was measured. It was simply assumed that good general education test results reflected good preparation. In the British colonial system at that time high school students represented the sort of potential intellectual elite as Eric Williams and C.L. R. James have described so memorably. The Calabar High School motto, written on every notebook, declared: "When you play, play hard. When you work, don't play at all." A number of students including myself took the motto seriously. Fifteen of the seventeen boys in my upper school cohort continued afterward to university. At Calabar I learned that living on an island did not mean that one was insular in all respects for the mind and brain remained unfettered and one's ambitions, like one's imagination, were restrained only by one's volition. I left Calabar High School at the age of nineteen with a solid conviction of who I was and what I could do with my intellectual talents. No doubt I was mentally as well as physically tough and both aspects would be tested later. Nevertheless, I did not have the slightest clue about what I would do with my life, or even how university life differed from that in high school. I left Calabar and entered the University College of the West Indies, then an external college of the University of London established in 1948. It was a logical progression, aided by a generous stipend from the University, but still overcome by naiveté, I had no idea what lay ahead for me.

I recall when and how I decided to concentrate on the study of history. I selected history honors as an incoming student at the University of the West Indies but the process of selection during that first bewildering week on campus was definitely an eccentric one based on elimination of other possible attractive choices—in this case Spanish and English Literature – and, like so many undergraduate choices, the mistaken perception that the history curriculum was both conveniently arranged and easy to accomplish. As a major in those days the courses were easy enough – a series of lectures that everyone considered to be optional and a required weekly meeting in a small group with a designated tutor. The weekly history tutorials required discussion of an essay written either individually or collectively. There were no examinations before the end of the final year.

During my first year I gradually discovered that history could be not only intellectually challenging but also immensely pleasurable and by the end of that year I never thought of doing anything else. Yet in making that fateful decision to become a historian I was, perhaps, unconsciously responding to the persuasive technique of some excellent college instructors of the craft as well as to something permeating the Caribbean air of the turbulent early 1960s. I was fully a product of my time. Nationalism was rampant across the Caribbean and I caught the fever.

A number of the university professors were understandably British expatriates. The student body, however, reflected the full variety of Caribbean nationalities and phenotypes. The untimely demise of the West Indies Federation

spawned a rapid proliferation of independent Caribbean mini-states in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s so nationalism was a part of our daily conversation and deeply influenced, albeit unconsciously, my later historical studies. My acquaintances and friends at the university were as likely to be from Barbados, Trinidad, Grenada, Guyana, the Bahamas or Belize as from Jamaica. I arrived on campus just as the university Vice Chancellor, the Nobel Prize winner in Economics Sir Arthur Lewis from St. Lucia, was leaving for Princeton University. One highlight of my freshman year was having dinner with the Vice Chancellor and listening to his recollections of his own university days in Great Britain. I was struck by his modesty and command of regional politics and society.

A number of students were then on the campus who would distinguish themselves later in various fields. I lived in Chancellor Hall along with Walter Rodney, Gordon Rohlehr, and Geoffrey Woo Ming of Guyana as well as young men from the entire range of British Caribbean territories. In other halls at the time were Orlando Patterson, Richard Fletcher, Norman Girvan and Maureen Warner-Lewis. In my history tutorials were Colin Palmer of Jamaica, John Cumberbatch and Betty Gollop of Barbados as well as Pauline Sahoy from Guyana. Equally important, my undergraduate peers ranged in age from the late teens to the late thirties. Some of my fellow classmates had served in their countries' civil service or had been gainfully employed before entering the university. They brought to our wide-ranging discussions a maturity, wisdom and experience that I certainly lacked. At Mona, as later at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, I began to appreciate the fortuitous intangible value of

belonging to a good academic cohort. Undoubtedly, I learned as much from my peers as from my professors. At the University of the West Indies I learned the value of listening carefully to my peers and thinking carefully before speaking. Some of them could be savagely unkind to careless assertions. Nevertheless, I could hold my own among the upper class students. In my first year I was elected to edit the major undergraduate magazine – my reputation as an editor had preceded me on campus – and I was also chosen to be an inter-hall debater along with Walter Rodney. I reveled in both the formal and informal aspects of university life. Unfortunately, my penchant for long hours at the student's union proved incompatible with my previous sports career, leaving me an enthusiastic sideline supporter of intra-mural and international competitions.

The history department at Mona was a stimulating place to be when I entered it in the early 1960s. It still followed the guidelines of the University of London with a strong emphasis on British and European history although there was the possibility for history majors to do a special yearlong field in Caribbean history. Historians were also required to do a field in political philosophy. John Parry left shortly before I arrived, but his various publications appeared on our required reading lists and would have a very strong influence on my studies, not only at Mona but also later at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

The two individuals who influenced me most at Mona were Professor Sir Roy Augier and Professor Elsa Vesta Goveia, both then young dynamic members of the department of history. With their markedly different styles they taught an indelible type of historical methodology that seamlessly integrated

primary and secondary sources while eroding the boundaries of theory and practice, or narrative and analysis. Both were passionately interested in establishing Caribbean history as a major field of research and writing. Moreover they demonstrated that in order to understand Caribbean history well one had to be quite familiar with the histories of Europe, Africa, Asia, and the United States. Roy Augier from St. Lucia was of a different temperament but demonstrated the same sterling qualities of intellectual acuity as Goveia. His empathy, generosity and encyclopedic bibliographical knowledge invariably intimidated but also greatly endeared him to generations of students. If Goveia emphasized that every book or document deserved to be closely and carefully read, Augier stressed the importance of careful listening, literally and figuratively, to everything that was said. Both practiced what they preached and infected their students with the paramount importance of the study of history not only for the accumulation of knowledge but also for the relevance to community construction and nation building. They had a remarkable way of connecting their ideas to something relevant to the Caribbean. Both Augier and Goveia were extremely demanding professors while still being approachable and supportive. Their demanding tutorials were excellent models for training good historians as well as predictable occasions for personal humility. Having a hastily prepared paper ripped apart constructively communicated a lesson not lost later when I entered graduate school. I spent much more time thinking about what and how I would present the arguments of my written and oral presentations.

Goveia, Guyanese by birth, was already a legend on the Mona campus. The first woman to win the highly competitive and enormously prestigious British Guiana Scholarship in 1944, she went up to read history at the University of London where she became the first West Indian to win the prestigious Pollard Prize in English History along with a First Class Honours in 1948. Her doctoral dissertation, completed in 1952, was published in 1965 with the title Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the end of the Eighteenth Century. When I entered the college in 1961 Elsa Goveia had just been designated Professor of West Indian History – the first female professor in the history of British higher education. She was also the first West Indian, and the first female, to be awarded a chair, but neither she nor her students made much of her accomplishments either then or later. Rather, students were attracted to the unassuming Goveia because she was a brilliant lecturer with a beautifully modulated voice generously infused with equal proportions of contagious charm, engaging wit, and matchless erudition. She was an extraordinarily rigorous scholar, as well as a highly original thinker. Her intellectual range and depth were simply astonishing. A voracious reader, her command of several literatures was exemplary. Yet she was spontaneously encouraging of most students and retained a life-long interest in the careers of some. I qualified for Professor Goveia's tutorials – she tested aspirants before accepting any to her group – and worked very hard to hold my own. I never got more than a B+ in any written paper, and never knew anyone who had got an excellent grade, but she was copious in her suggestions and occasionally wrote that some idea was very good

and worth pursuing more fully. I would frequently go back to her throughout my graduate school days for support and inspiration.

Goveia patiently and methodically postulated on the importance of good questions, carefully explained the varieties of approaches to historical writing, the importance of data, and the connections between geographical regions, periods of time, and the production of history. Her forte was the close reading of documents and books but she recognized that historical sources were not restricted to just documents and books. She had recently published A Study on the Historiography of the British West Indies to the end of the Nineteenth Century and that volume illustrates very well her approach to history in general and the British West Indies in particular. It deeply influenced my own work then and it remains one of my most frequently consulted volumes. Goveia's selected sources included works in Spanish, French, Latin and Dutch and she showed that even among writers of the relatively distant past in the Caribbean, the local was invariably linked to the global. Good history she repeatedly emphasized required a good working command of several languages and monumental patience. Equally important, Goveia looked not just at what was written but she also tried to fathom the mind of the author of the document or publication. She brought a clearly defined philosophy of history to her work and she revolutionized the way in which the British West Indies, and by extension the wider Caribbean, was seen and written about. In her quiet and effective way she postulated that the Caribbean experience constituted an integral part of human experience. Learning about the Caribbean, could, therefore, inform about the broader human

condition worldwide. That is the theme that I too try to convey in all my courses and writings on the Caribbean and Latin America. The local may be connected to the global in important ways. This approach is much more readily acceptable today than it was in the 1960s.

I was impressed by the clear thinking, persuasive speaking and brilliant writing of Elsa Goveia. The centrality of the Caribbean to modern world history appears clearly in Elsa Goveia's better-known magisterial publication, Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands. In this work she coined the term "slave society" although it appeared often in her lectures and discussions on the Caribbean. Along with many of her students, I would adopt the phrase and use it frequently. The notion that the Caribbean colonies represented a complex type of society was relatively novel at the time and impressed me powerfully. Goveia explained the term (placed within quotation marks) in the preface to her book on the British Leeward Islands. "The term 'slave society' in the title of this book refers to the whole community based on slavery, including masers and freedmen as well as slaves. My object has been to study the political, economic, and social organizations of this society and the interrelationships of its component groups and to investigate how it was affected by its dependence on the institution of slavery." Today the term "slave society" is casually thrown about but in the early 1960s it represented an entirely new way of understanding the complex nature of plantation societies and slave systems. By the time that I got to graduate school in the mid 1960s I had acquired a sophisticated appreciation of the complexities of slave systems and the inherent difficulties in comparing them. At Wisconsin I

became convinced that my understanding of slave systems in general was way ahead of my non-Caribbean peers. They continued to talk of disaggregated groups of dichotomously divided masters and slaves. I saw a social complex that changed through time and reacted reciprocally to time, place and circumstances. But slavery was only one dimension of the importance of the Caribbean to modern history.

By the time I got to Mona Anglo-centric assertions about the Caribbean were unfashionable. Clearly much had been discovered and written about the Caribbean between the generation of Eric Williams (or Lowell Ragatz) writing in the first part of the twentieth century and myself. My generation knew better partly because we read more widely from a rapidly growing field of literature, but also because more local archives were opening up offering a variety of new information as well as new ways to examine it. We had much greater detail about the early development of the Caribbean and the Americas after 1492. Local histories were becoming plentiful indicating that the period before slavery overtook the Caribbean was important. Barbados and St. Kitts began as settler societies of English immigrants. Guadeloupe and Martinique along with some of the smaller nearby islands were established with permanent French settlements in mind. And many early Spanish did consider the Caribbean islands to be their permanent homes. How did these essentially European settlements come to reflect the wide demographic variety of the middle of the twentieth century? How did the Caribbean move from the mainstream of empire to the periphery? These questions endlessly fascinated us. That we knew more about the Caribbean did

not lead us to rashly discard what was accurate and acceptable in the earlier works of John Parry or Lowell Ragatz. In our tutorials at Mona we learned that we ourselves could err in some ways and yet get some things right. Learning was a constant effort in shifting, winnowing and refining.

From Elsa Goveia we learned that there were positive dimensions to Caribbean history and that it was the inescapable responsibility of Caribbean historians to discover and promulgate those characteristics. History should serve as a tool in the construction of the nation, however the nation was defined and wherever it was found. To Goveia the history of the Caribbean was far more than European activities in the region, and it certainly predated the arrival of Christopher Columbus. As one of her students, therefore, I looked for the continuities and discontinuities in the construction of the societies of the Caribbean and eventually believed that the past was important for the present as well as the future. The history of slavery constituted an important aspect of the complex development of Caribbean societies, but it was not the alpha and omega of the Caribbean experience. As she explained,

It is essential for West Indians to grasp in all its complexity the nature of the influence which slavery has exercised over their history. But they will not be able to do so until they can see the white colonists, the free people of colour, and the Negro slaves as joint participants in a human situation which shaped all their lives...Good intentions are not enough, and the road to hell is paved with authoritative half-truths. No one is ever liberated

from the past by being taught how easy it is to substitute new shibboleths for old.

Those were words that she wrote, and spoke meaningfully and persuasively to generations of students. I took them to heart and have tried to ensure that my considered opinions reflected serious considerations of the complexities of the subject. I probably would never be an advisor to any government, but maybe someone reading what I wrote could be persuaded about the relevance of the past to the present, of the intrinsic value of history to the construction of civil society. When I started to develop my interest in the history of slavery and American slave systems I was convinced that this theme offered an important window not only into the construction of a tropical colonial Creole society but also that it had intrinsic value to the wider world.

At the end of my second year I began a year-long research project that ended up in a long and undistinguished paper on the role of slavery in Caribbean history. I gathered a lot of data on Caribbean slave societies but could not make many useful generalizations about the system as a whole because my data was unevenly drawn from the British West Indies. How did the slave systems change through time? What essential differences, if any, existed across imperial boundaries? How pervasive was slavery in social values? I could not answer those simple questions. If my overall results were unimpressive then I nevertheless learned a lot about locating and analyzing primary sources, and the patent shortcomings of many publications by internationally distinguished

historians. My Mona experience sharpened my academic tools but also infused in me a healthy skepticism about the printed word.

On graduation from the University of the West Indies – it had gained autonomous university status during my attendance – I set off for the University of Wisconsin on a scholarship offered by its Program in Comparative Tropical History under the direction of Philip Curtin. I consulted Goveia and other colleagues about the program. Most were dismissive, if not downright condescending. Goveia was positively encouraging. She pointed out that the University of Wisconsin had one of the best departments of history anywhere and that Curtin had written an excellent book on Jamaica. She also stressed that its interdisciplinary approach would be invaluable. I re-read the Curtin book on Jamaica but made no other intellectual preparation for what would be, for me, a profoundly transformational change in many respects.

I left Jamaica in the summer of 1964 to attend the University of Wisconsin in Madison. I was about to enter serious post-graduate training in history yet I had never asked myself what I would do with a graduate degree in history nor did I question the value of history as a suitable career choice. I never examined the inherent bias toward political and economic history that I had unconsciously acquired along the way. I still thought wars, dates and dynasties were interesting, informative and the basic requirements for history. I went off to graduate school more casually than I went on vacation. I never looked up what members of the history department at Wisconsin wrote, or what the strengths of the department were. Frankly, I knew nothing about the university beyond its

limited promotional literature. I went to Wisconsin thinking that I would study for a higher degree and return to Jamaica either to teach at the university level or to find appropriate employment in government. That was the profile of graduates of the University of the West Indies during my time there. I preferred to concentrate on the present and let the future take care of itself. If I had to get a job any adequately paid employment would do. Things did not turn out quite like that. Wisconsin provided an entirely new experience for me and tested me in many ways, academic and otherwise, before I graduated with a doctorate in history and the irrevocable decision to become an academic and a professional historian.

Getting accustomed to life outside the classroom in Madison was extremely challenging at first. It was a culture shock. People in the Caribbean were not, generally speaking, nasty and anti-social. Rather, they tended to be extremely courteous to strangers. Nowhere in the Caribbean was there the inescapable preoccupation with race, color and geographical origin that permeated North American society in the early 1960s. Madison, as a university town, was the most liberal area in the state of Wisconsin, but it still strongly reflected all the traditions of institutionalized discrimination and racist segregation that characterized the broader American society. Many townsfolk strongly disliked the out-of-state students at the university and were openly hostile to foreign students. Some folks were crudely racist. Finding a barber or an off-campus apartment was no easy matter for a non-European, non-white resident of the city. Indeed it was much easier to live when I went to do research in Madrid, Spain under Generalissimo Francisco Franco than in self-styled democratic

Madison. My idealistic preconceptions of American democracy were shattered during my sojourn there. Since at that time I never intended to reside permanently in the United States, the racism never bothered me too much. I could hold my own verbally with bigots and fortunately I was never physically attacked. Neither colonialism nor bigotry scarred me psychologically but in any case I bulked up a bit should the need arise to defend myself or my family physically. Jamaicans generally were usually not aggressive people until provoked. Then all Christian charity immediately evaporated. I was not in Madison, however, to prove my machismo on the streets but to get a degree, if I could, at the university. Most of my time, therefore, was spent on campus.

The department of history at the University of Wisconsin in Madison was larger and better than I could have expected. It had about sixty members covering just about every field. It was exceptional in two areas. It had a very large African studies department, a rarity in any university; and it had a newly instituted program in comparative tropical history to which I had been admitted along with a number of students from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Germany, Canada and the United States of America. Although it was difficult to adjust to the extreme Wisconsin weather, especially the long, harsh winters, or, for me, the idiosyncratic local culture, the university community in those days before the United States became fully engaged in the Vietnam War effervesced with interesting people and stimulating ideas. Some students, partly out of ignorance and partly out of jealousy, referred to the program in comparative history as “swamp history” – a mischievous, comically misguided reference to its apparent

concentration on the tropical regions with large rivers and aquatic civilizations. But it was a creative development in the training of historians. I immediately loved it. Comparative tropical history was not narrowly tropical at all. It was genuinely world history from a non-European perspective. It required majoring in one geographical area of the world with a minor in another. The program later evolved into a distinguished operation in comparative world history but at the time I participated, it was centered on African Studies with complementary areas in the Americas, India, and Asia. I focused on Latin America under the direction of John Leddy Phelan, an extroverted, likeable and articulate ex-Jesuit with a penchant for clear writing who, like Elsa Goveia, died unexpectedly at an early age. Phelan, like many Latin Americanists, trained students across the full range of colonial and modern Latin America. I also took courses and seminars in African history with Curtin and Jan Vansina and on India with John Smal. All the better professors at Wisconsin were extremely accessible and open-minded.

At Wisconsin my decision to major in Latin American history and minor in African history exposed me to two academic fields in which I was previously dismally unprepared. Frankly, although I was reasonably familiar with its geography, I did not know much about Latin American history at all. Mexico was the only Latin American country that I had briefly visited as an undergraduate. As an undergraduate I had majored, if that is the applicable term, in modern history with its excessive reliance on British and European history. That focus, however, would serve me well later. At Mona the single course in Latin American History during my attendance was offered by a non-Spanish-speaking Caribbean

economic historian whose cavalier attitude to the field reflected many of the major shortcomings of a British-style graduate education. At best it described the activities of the English in Latin America especially during the nineteenth century and at worst it was history by analogy. Latin American area studies and Latin American literature were booming and Wisconsin was at the forefront of this. I was curious about the peoples and cultures surrounding my Caribbean and the countries that had, in many cases, played host to large numbers of Caribbean migrants. I read avidly in that field and was especially excited by the poetry of Pablo Neruda and Nicolás Guillén. Moreover, since I was still clinging to the idea that I would go back to the Caribbean to teach history, Spanish and Portuguese America appeared to be obviously relevant, although manifestly neglected in University of the West Indies course offerings.

The academic system at Wisconsin was very different from that of the University of the West Indies, especially in the graduate program. At the University of the West Indies, like most English universities, graduate students spent three isolated years researching and writing their thesis. Graduate school at Wisconsin was a more focused and serious coordinated training operation. As an undergraduate I had sacrificed sports for activities like drama and student government but had managed to keep up my eclectic general reading. Wisconsin, alas, required more personal sacrifices. My dismal ignorance of my two major fields, Latin America and Africa, meant that I had to abandon any notions of non-academic interests. My first meeting with John Leddy Phelan, my departmentally designated faculty advisor, immediately put me somewhat at

ease. Although he was formal at that initial encounter he got to the point immediately. He overlooked my deficient preparation after abruptly switching our conversation to Spanish and appreciating the fact that I was not in any way disconcerted by his strange exercise. He pointed out that I would have to study French and Portuguese during the summers and gave me a long reading list along with a sermon on his notoriously high expectations of graduate students. We were, in his opinion, expected to know everything about every book that was already published or about to be published. And in every field we were expected to know more than he did. Fortunately, since I did not know what he knew at the time the implausibility of the remark completely escaped my attention.

Otherwise, I would probably have caught the first plane back to Jamaica. Despite his off-hand remark about the high mortality rates of graduate students in Latin American history, I was not dismayed and suspected that he spoke in jest, or at least, exaggerated. Graduate school was all about history and its affiliated requirements, about spurning delights to live laborious days. There was much to do and relatively little time in which to do it. There was much writing and many courses and seminars in different fields simultaneously. Before long, getting accustomed to a cranky duplicating machine in the poorly lit basement of Bascom Hall was a common tale of woe among all graduate students. That eccentric machine was a perpetual exercise in humility for four long years.

African history was the toughest field for me. I had never had a course in the field, had never done any reading beyond a few novels by Peter Abrahams, Nadine Gordimer and Chinua Achebe. Unlike many of my returning ex-Peace

Corps colleagues I had never been to Africa. Competing in African history required supreme effort

Although I seemed so ill-prepared for a demanding graduate program, I never despaired. The unfriendly weather of those unbelievably long winters made it easy to manage my time and keep indoors, especially in the reading rooms of the two great libraries on campus. I had never been exposed to so many books and such ample resources for study. Going through the card catalogues – in both the old Dewey decimal system and the newer Library of Congress classification scheme – was like a foretaste of literary paradise. I quickly formulated a personal *modus operandi* for those pre-information technology days: book reviews and publishers catalogs would become almost daily reading material. Like my peers I became adept in that pre-computer age, at note-taking on multi-colored 3x5 and 5x8 notecards with the former devoted to bibliographic references. The smaller cards were for bibliographical references and the larger ones for notes. Quickly I learned, as did so many others, that book reviews could be as misleading as the publishers' promotional material and that a well constructed index was like a gift from the gods.

By the end of my first year I had done enough academically to surprise myself pleasantly, fulfilling all the requirements for the Master of Arts in History and writing a thesis on the Cuban Ten Year's War of 1868-1878 that, in retrospect, relied too extensively on secondary printed sources. (Later I would look at primary sources for this period although I never returned to this topic.) By the end of my first year in Madison I had acquired some good time management

skills and begun to understand how historians thought and the basics of historical methodology.

I made the transition, successfully but not easily, from undergraduate school in a warm, pleasant tropical island to graduate school in a challengingly cold northern locale without too much difficulty. The distance between Kingston, Jamaica and Madison, Wisconsin is far less than the distance across the United States. But the two cities were worlds apart. The scale of the operation at Wisconsin was overwhelming at first. The university had more students than most British Caribbean towns, and might even have approximated the population of some of the smaller islands at the time. The Wisconsin graduate school alone had more students than the entire student body at Mona. In Madison the array of outstanding historians and varieties of historical methods were bewildering but the accessibility of the faculty made communication outside one's field of specialization relatively easy. The doctoral program in Latin American history required a number of courses in anthropology and political science. Phelan strongly encouraged consultations with other faculty, especially suggesting that his Latin American history students discuss relevant questions with the respective professors in American history such as William Appleman Williams, or William Taylor, who several years later would join me on the faculty at the State University of New York. Every student I knew dropped in on the exciting lectures by George Mosse and Harvey Goldberg who were competing vigorously with each other to see who could attract the larger audience on campus. I was comfortable with my command of British and European history but in every other

field I was starting from scratch. I was very fortunate to have someone as patient, extroverted and broadly-based as John Phelan as my academic advisor.

Phelan was gregarious, inquisitive, informed and insatiably curious a fact illustrated in his outstanding professional productions. With an Irish Catholic background from Boston, he easily blended a genteel political activism with rigorous scholarship and expected his students to do the same. As a foreigner on a student visa, political activism for me would have been imprudent, but I managed to acquire some scholarly rigor. I started by reading all the publications of my professors, something that nowadays every prospective graduate student routinely does. Phelan wrote much better than his oral presentations. His work illustrated two highly appealing qualities to me. The first was a sound appreciation of the other social sciences as well as literatures that informed his lectures and his writing. While I had read widely as an undergraduate, I paid less attention to disciplinary differences and so could not really identify the precise ways in which academic disciplines differed methodologically. That I learned at Wisconsin. The second impressive Phelan attribute was a remarkable competence that spanned the entire region of Latin America as well as the Caribbean. He knew every country intimately and had visited most of them. John Phelan convinced most of his students that span was important and allowed one to appreciate the consummate importance of geography to community construction. I slowly realized during my graduate studies with Phelan that Latin America was not any single country on a larger scale. Moreover, every country was a disconcerting combination of perplexing variety. Just as I was acutely

aware of inter-Caribbean differences I would also have to become intimately acquainted with the enormous variety of that immense region called Latin America. That was a challenge that I accepted with gusto.

Phelan knew a range of Latin American scholars and had worked in several archives in Spain as well as across Latin America. He was an excellent academic advisor and role model. He frequently took his graduate students to lunches or dinners in outrageously expensive restaurants across the state where the discussions could range freely from the immediate theme of academic interest to the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, the pleasures of Ibiza, or the comparative qualities of specific wines. He was also an excellent cook, frequently treating his seminar participants to private dinners where, by desert, the enthusiastic consumption loosened and emboldened both tongues and minds. Phelan was not paternalistic, patronizing, or arrogant, and encouraged his graduate students to give him spontaneous evaluations of his classes and seminars. He was surprisingly receptive to adverse criticisms and treated his favorite graduate students just like junior colleagues. I cannot, however, recall any outrageous indiscretion on such occasions. Phelan gave and received respect from his students. John Phelan became a successful professional role model for me although our personal worlds were so different. I got to like him and I think the feelings were mutual. Later he would always remember the names of my wife and children and until his unexpected death we corresponded frequently.

My Caribbean academic preparation served me well in graduate school. I thought that I was, in general, more widely read than my North American counterparts and less discriminating in disciplinary divisions. I classified books and authors informally by fields rather than by disciplines. In the Caribbean it really did not matter to what field an author belonged as long as his work was relevant to an understanding of the theme pursued. I had never heard anyone described as a public intellectual. Nor did the race or color of the author become a prerequisite for evaluating the quality of the work. In the Caribbean invidious distinctions of color were not routinely applied to authors and so students were able to read books by scholars such as W. E. B. Dubois without caring much about his race or his personal politics or letting those considerations influence the importance of his ideas. DuBois' idea of the talented tenth and the importance of Africa and Africans resonated throughout the Caribbean with its long tradition of back-to-Africa movements. At Wisconsin most of my brightest white student colleagues had never heard of Dubois, or Marcus Garvey, or even read Gunnar Myrdal's outstanding compilation on race relations in the United States. As a result much of what Dubois was railing about in his books was lost. It was very difficult for an outsider to understand society and politics in the United States. I was incredulous that schools and public accommodations could be still legally segregated in the middle of the twentieth century. But then, the 1960s were the decade of American civil rights indicating that many Americans were not only incredulous but impatient for change.

History seminars at Wisconsin in the early 1960s were delightful but challenging. They tended to be small, with about six participants who quickly developed a strong camaraderie. It seemed that everyone generously shared their ideas and were spontaneously helpful. My student colleagues were a contagiously invigorating and intellectually generous group, many of whom later became distinguished historians including Joe Alagoa, Joe Miller, Phil Shea, Patrick Manning, Colin Palmer, Myron Echenberg, Matilde Zimmerman, Mary Karasch, David Cohen, Allen Isaacman, Jane Loy Rausch, Patricia Progre, David Sweet, and Ann Zulawski. Several graduate students were returning Peace Corps volunteers who had seen some exotic part of the world and shared that arrogant conviction that how they saw the world was how it really was. Seminars were sometimes exceptionally lively, but the really insightful discussions took place in informal sessions late at nights in smoke-filled student meeting places like Glenn and Ann's, or Paisan's, or at the enormous Student's Union. Students got together very well and were extremely cooperative. In my first semester a fellow student who majored in African history and shared many courses with me agreed that we would split the cost of purchasing all the assigned and recommended books for all our common courses. Soon we had a comprehensive library of relevant books in African and Latin American history, and read far more than the minimal course requirements. Not surprisingly, we were always among the most prepared for each class.

I had always loved reading and I also loved books. I liked to read not only to expand my informational base, but equally important I read with an eye for the

basic quality of the research, or the originality of the insights, or the stylistic precision and elegance of the language. I loved language before I loved history and as I advanced through graduate school I gradually realized the importance of the essential compatibility between language and history. Good history required clear, precise writing. Historians were supposed to be not just good storytellers but persuasive interpreters of the human past and the human condition. Historians had a responsibility to retrieve relevant lessons from the past in order to inform the present and provide guidelines for the future. I could see the relevance of the solid foundation laid with my earlier studies at Mona. In four years at Wisconsin it all came together.

Apart from Phelan's writings, two works that especially impressed me were Philip Curtin's Two Jamaicas and Robert H. McNeill's The Rise of the West. In their different ways – like the personalities of the two authors – these are truly outstanding, highly original models of historical scholarship. Both are based on meticulous research and exemplify superb writing skills. Like Goveia, Curtin in Two Jamaicas considered Jamaica around the middle of the nineteenth century to be an autonomous society rather than a marginal appendage of British society. I found its insight and originality astonishing. Using the conventional manuscript and printed sources available in Britain and Jamaica, Curtin gave them a strikingly original interpretation and revealed a complexity and nuance that escaped previous historians. He also coined the marvelously useful phrase, “South Atlantic System” to describe the complex overlapping pattern of trades and demographic exchanges that has often misleadingly been described as an

Atlantic Triangular Trade. John Parry could dazzle with his vast informational base and incisive knowledge of sailing but his writing remained emphatically Eurocentric. Curtin linked the developing political consciousness of a small Caribbean colony with the events and ideas of the wider Atlantic world and demonstrated how carefully chosen case studies could inform broad generalizations in history. He did more to bring awareness and academic respectability to African history than any other of his contemporaries. His lectures were illustrated with slides of his travels across Africa and Latin America and his command of esoteric information was simply astonishing. I strongly admired Curtin's technique in re-centering history away from the north Atlantic axis. That was how I too wanted to see the world and its peoples. I wanted to see them on their own terms.

McNeill's Rise of the West was required reading in Curtin's courses and seminars. This large, attractively strange book ranges boldly across geography and time like some energetic muralist working on an oversized wall. The bibliographical command is, not surprisingly, extremely outstanding. But two aspects of the Rise of the West especially impressed me. The first was that it was a model global history (when the term had not yet gained currency) that did not privilege Europe and the Europeans the way that most college textbooks in western civilization did at that time. The second is that it cleverly used artwork and illustrations not as appendages to the text but as integral parts of the textual explanations. McNeill's approach paralleled Fernand Braudel and the Annales School by giving inordinate importance to economics, art, literature, geography

and culture. History was more than politics, war and diplomacy. History was also about how people responded to their changing environment. Both Curtin and McNeil forced me to include many other factors than social, political and economic into my historical equations and inadvertently helped me to realize the severe limitations of Marxist or Positivist schools of history. But it also helped me conceptualize Latin American and Caribbean history without the conventional chronological divisions created by dynasties, wars, and international treaties. What I had acquired at Wisconsin was a keen appreciation of the new social history with its generous borrowing from other disciplines and its unqualified sensitivity to all orders of society. Later this was referred to as “history from below” but I have never found myself fond of that term.

For my doctoral thesis I thought initially of doing something on the economy and society of early colonial Mexico. As a specialist on colonial history in general and on Mexico in particular Phelan was encouraging although he never insisted that his disciples become his clones. In any case that was not easy since Phelan ranged freely across the entire Latin American region. My original idea, probably the result of dabbling with anthropology, was to explore the economic and social roles of pulque, a rather unpleasant-tasting beverage fermented from the milk of the maguey plant, in the domestic market economy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The theme was too ambitious at the time and I floundered much before abandoning the task. I collected considerable data on production but could not follow sales and distribution of the product. The paper from my initial research was never published and I never

revisited the subject, although later I would contemplate writing on rum and society in the Caribbean. I faced two major obstacles for my original Mexican research study. My command of Spanish paleography was exceedingly weak and despite investing an entire summer in the Llanos de Apan, that long, semi-arid plateau straddling the provinces of Hidalgo and Tlaxcala not far from Mexico City, I found that my data could not answer the simple questions I was asking. In the end it was obvious how pulque was produced and who consumed it, but its role in the wider economic society beyond the work force on the producing haciendas escaped me at the time.

Abandoning the research on pulque represented a failure but not a disastrous setback with any prolonged consequences. My graduate fellowship did not depend on the success of that particular project. Phelan was quite sympathetic to my plight and we discussed my obvious shortcomings. He advised that I find something else that I could do more comfortably. I told myself that I would concentrate on an age where the documents were printed and information more accessible. I decided that I would try to do a comparative study of the slave societies of Cuba and Brazil during the nineteenth centuries. This would allow me to use my Spanish and Portuguese language skills as well as visit two countries that fascinated me, although it was no easier to travel to Cuba in 1967 than in 2008. Given the restricted funding sources for foreign students, I could not get support to go to Brazil but I went to Spain and worked for a year in the Archivo General de la Nación, and in the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid as well as the Archivo General de Indias in Seville. The military archives in Segovia

used with such incredible success by John Tone were not then open to the public. In those days when General Franco was active, Spain was an extremely interesting place. The archives were not as accessible as they are today but Spanish society and politics were fascinating and complex.

The idea of doing a dissertation on slavery did not come out of the blue. I had dabbled with the theme under Elsa Goveia. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade was a staple of Philip Curtin's Comparative Tropical History Program and I had tentatively explored the idea in an earlier seminar paper with John Phelan. As preparation for that seminar we all had to read carefully Frank Tannenbaum's Slave and Citizen, a remarkable book by a most remarkable author.

Tannenbaum himself visited the university and we had a session with him. He was a thoughtful, prolific and talented writer as well as one of the founders of Latin American studies in the United States. His book truly justifies the description of seminal and was widely read and exceedingly influential in the 1960s. Nevertheless, the book grew out of a modest seminar at Columbia University in the late 1930s and while avant-garde for that time, was woefully unsatisfactory from many points of view by the mid 1960s. Not the least of its deficiencies was its lack of the use of primary sources.

Tannenbaum's principal assumption, stated boldly in his book, dealt with the moral relationship implicit in slavery. Linking together questions of freedom, liberty, justice, law and morality, Tannenbaum believed that Latin America provided a more conducive social atmosphere for slaves and ex-slaves as they transited from subordination to independence. But his argument was weak and

largely unsubstantiated. The principal value of Tannenbaum's study rested on its firm conviction that comparative study afforded illumination of specific cases, and examining slavery elsewhere in the Americas could enhance an understanding of slavery in the United States of America. There were a lot of provocative questions raised by Tannenbaum's insightful work. Tannenbaum treated slavery as a static institution unchanging across geographical space as well over centuries. He assumed, like many others, that imperial divisions provided reliable boundaries for discrete colonial cultures and he remained convinced that material and moral conditions of slavery provided a reliable basis for predicting future race relations in post-emancipation societies and that all societies developed in a linear fashion. He vastly overestimated the number of Africans brought to the New World as slaves, estimating the number at probably twenty millions.

By the late 1960s it was possible to do a lot more with the study of slavery and the prolific bibliography on the subject reflected this. For one thing, Philip Curtin brought some order to the vast range of figures used to estimate the number of Africans brought to the Americas as slaves. Examining a large variety of sources, Curtin arrived at a total of approximately ten million Africans – with a margin of error of about twenty percent – sold in the Americas and that figure has stood the test of time very well. Before his study appeared in 1969 he generously allowed me access to this work and that influenced both my dissertation and my first book. Also, by the end of the 1960s the subject of slavery had become a veritable growth industry attracting major attention from scholars on both sides of the Atlantic although many of the publications followed the old Tannenbaum

school of thought. I did not begin my study, however, using Tannenbaum as a straw man. I began with some open-ended questions on the nature of slavery in Cuba and how it could reasonably be compared with the other Caribbean and Latin American cases.

Connections are important to a fledgling historian. In my research on Cuban slave society my contacts certainly were. The initial generosity of Philip Curtin and John Phelan to a young, foreign graduate student was paralleled by equally surprising encouragement and support derived from many other distinguished scholars who were complete strangers at the time. On the suggestion of John Phelan, I wrote to many senior scholars in the field asking for advice and comments on my proposed research. I got some very helpful replies. Roland Ely wrote me a long encouraging letter from Venezuela with extensive suggestions on possible primary sources. Magnus Mörner from Sweden sent me a copy of the latest Guía del Archivo Nacional of Cuba that permitted me to get an excellent idea of the extraordinarily rich archival sources available for the study of Cuban history. The major problem was how to get to Cuba. Sidney Mintz replied to me from Iran and suggested that I look carefully at the recent publication of Manuel Moreno Fraginals, El ingenio: el complejo económico social cubano del azúcar. That was the first I had heard of that publication. While I was doing research in Madrid, Horacio Fuentes Martínez of the Cuban Embassy magnanimously offered to get a copy of Moreno's book from Cuba so that I could consult it while I was in Madrid. Later Moreno Fraginals and I would become great friends and he would render enormous assistance in Cuba,

showing me around the research facilities and introducing me to many of the leading Cuba scholars to whom I remain greatly indebted for all they taught me about the history, society and culture of their island. These scholars and others like Peter Smith, Eugene Genovese, Hugh Cleland, David Trask, and Bernard Semmel made invaluable contributions to my developing the ideas that are found in my first major publication, Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century. Their questions forced me to clarify fuzzy passages and substantiate loose assertions. Together they made the work considerably better than the original dissertation on which it was based.

Luck followed me throughout my academic career. When I finished my doctoral dissertation in 1968 there were more jobs for Latin Americanists than qualified applicants that year. My original desire to return to the University of the West Indies suffered an irreversible setback when the head of the history department wrote that they had no opening for me. I went on the teaching market in the United States and got several attractive offers. Over Phelan's reservations, I accepted a teaching position at the newly established State University of New York at Stony Brook which seemed to be the least cold location available in the United States. I made a promise to myself in Madison that I would never live anyplace as cold as that. So on the northern shores of Long Island, New York, I started to implement those good practices for mastering the profession of a historian that I had acquired along the way. I had absolutely no university teaching experience before accepting my job at Stony Brook so my initial two years acquiring the requisite skills were difficult ones. My first

assignments were to teach a year-long course on comparative world history; and to teach another on the history of Mexico. It never occurred to me that the teaching load was light. At the time it seemed as though, having studied slavery I was experiencing it. I would stay up late at night preparing my classes, invariably over-preparing and fretting excessively about whether I could ever cover all the important points I felt absolutely necessary for my students to hear. Sometimes I would work through the night and still feel invigorated for my eight o'clock morning class.

I think that I eventually became a good historian through the generous help of others but developing the skills of a good teacher was a solitary assignment. I worked at it as hard as I had during my formal courses to become a historian. Stony Brook was an excellent first job with wonderful colleagues and challenging students at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. From among both students and faculty I would make life-long friends.

In my first major published work I tried to do several things, not all of them successfully. The case study of Cuba in the nineteenth century demonstrated emphatically that American slave societies were uniquely dynamic constructs that varied in their genesis as well as in their disintegration. In doing the research I learned a lot of things that I never knew before, or grossly underestimated the importance of the information. Not all Africans in the Americas arrived as slaves or in servile conditions therefore not all African Americans were descendants of slaves. How did this affect contemporary societies? African slavery in the Americas was fundamentally different from slavery in any other part of the world,

and indeed from other forms of servitude. This certainly affected the way we should compare slave systems. Comparisons of slavery either across the Americas or around the world were best done systadially – that is selecting comparative stages of socio-economic development – rather than synchronically – that is, simply during a specific period of time. Any good comparison of Caribbean slave societies should focus on predominantly sugar producing territories at the peak of their productive stages. This would range over time from Barbados in the seventeenth century, Jamaica and Saint-Domingue in the eighteenth century and Cuba, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and the Guianas in the nineteenth century. I also suggested that Africans enslaved in the Americas did not lose their culture mysteriously in transit across the Atlantic Ocean or experience any of the symptoms of what later the sociologist Orlando Patterson would misleadingly call “social death.” Africans were vitally instrumental in every phase of the construction of the Americas after 1492 negating any reasonable assumption of intellectual or social inferiority despite their subordinate social and economic roles. Anyone who has studied the Haitian revolution could have no doubts about the innate creative abilities of Africans and their descendants in the New World. Strangely, no one paid much attention to the importance of the Haitian revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. By looking at slavery within the broader context of Cuban society as Elsa Goveia conceived it, I could determine that African slaves were merely disfranchised immigrants who were ruthlessly exploited and brutally abused. This coercion and subordination did not diminish their humanity in any way. Nor should that obscure the reciprocal way in which

Africans and their descendants contributed to the all-round development of their host societies. One could more easily examine these African and African American contributions by exploring the complex interrelated changes brought about by the sugar revolutions that converted overseas European settler societies into efficient models of unprecedented exploitation societies. These overseas sugar revolutions fundamentally changed both the American tropics and Europe.

My later publications derived mainly from my attempts to think through problems I found in what I had read or questions I could not answer satisfactorily from my teaching. I do owe one publication, The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism to Sheldon Meyer, the venerable and sadly missed editor of Oxford University Press. He was a rare type of scholarly editor, as deeply interested in ideas as in the potential revenue of a publication. When Meyer approached me at one of those famous Oxford University Press receptions perennially held at the conventions of the American Historical Association and asked if I would be interested in writing a general history of the Caribbean, I had never taught a course on Caribbean history. I was busily teaching various courses on several national units in Latin America covering the entire region from before Columbus to Fidel Castro. I had never contemplated doing a general study of the region, although I had frequently fulminated against the shortcomings of a range of books that pretended to be regional histories of the Caribbean. I myself had frequently treated the Caribbean as an integral dimension of the wider Latin American and comparative world history.

Nevertheless, I accepted the challenge. When I presented the outline, Meyer admitted that it was unconventional and different from what he had in mind. But he liked the concept very much. I conceived of a series of themes in Caribbean history that had a coherent framework but did not adhere strictly to chronology or follow the conventional periods dictated by previous sub-regional histories. I tried for something that would resonate across Caribbean linguistic boundaries adhering consistently to a regional approach. Since Meyer liked it I wrote the book. It reflected how I saw Caribbean history and how I have tried to teach it. As I wrote in the introduction to the first edition:

It is a history, therefore without designated heroes and significant dates...The heroes are what the Cuban poet, Nicolás Guillén would call Juan Nadies, or common folk, too numerous to mention; the dates are not specific years, but varying periods slipping almost imperceptibly by. Such has been the history of the Caribbean and the nature of change in that part of the world. The history of the Caribbean is the examination of fragments that, like looking at a broken vase, still provide clues to the form, beauty, and value of the past.

In retrospect, becoming a historian for me was not all that difficult. Only in graduate school did I realize what was truly required and by then I was mature enough to set my goals and pursue them with a minimum of obstruction. I had time, place, and circumstances on my side. I never experienced the crippling handicaps of segregation and legally enforced discrimination. I could think freely from a very early age. I came from an area of the world where stereotypes such

as “black” and “white” were neither permanently damaging nor insuperably obstructionist and debilitating. In my early Jamaican and Caribbean world an author could write a serious book entitled “my mother who fathered me” based on sound scientific research. Gender roles existed but never constituted formidable boundaries. Women handled sexism courageously. We did not get hung up with inventing labels we just got about doing things. Mentoring had no name but came intrinsically linked to any responsible position. All my teachers along the way were mentors and my entire career found me in a nurturing community of serious, intellectually curious scholars. That gave me the psychological freedom to define myself and my expectations independent of the expectations of the wider community. I was very lucky always to be my own man. That resulted in a sort of objectivity that served me well in foreign countries, especially in the United States. I could be detached without being indifferent – and that is a valuable tool to have in historical research. Of course, I must confess that I never became the narrow, single-minded nationalist historian I envisioned at the beginning of my undergraduate career. The confident impetuosity of my youth matured into a complex vision of history and of the world.

My fortuitous experience with a number of powerfully inspirational teachers permitted me to navigate my way into a professional career with a minimum of pain. The obstacles in my way were few and always insignificant. My timing, through no effort on my part, was perfect. I grew up in a genuinely democratic society and entered high school when the government of Jamaica subsidized a secondary education open to everyone based solely on intellectual

merit. I attended the local university at a time when the overwhelming majority of students were, unlike succeeding generations, paid handsomely to be there and provided the flexibility to do whatever they wanted, even to fail. The competitive scholarship I received to pursue graduate study at the University of Wisconsin in the 1960s placed me within an intellectually supportive atmosphere of highly productive faculty and unusually stimulating students. At Wisconsin I learned to think constructively and work diligently to become a historian. Most important of all, I learned good historical methodology and was determined to practice it. I have been incredibly fortunate with my departmental colleagues along the way. . Both at the State University of New York at Stony Brook where I began my career, and later at the Johns Hopkins University my colleagues have graciously and patiently read my work and helped me as I sifted and winnowed my rough ideas and clarified my thinking. They respected me and respected my scholarship. I was able to work with minimal distraction, free from excessive institutional committee obligations. Both institutions provided a desirably conducive atmosphere in which a scholar could keep growing intellectually. Without that unbroken sequence of good fortune I probably would not have become a historian.

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