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The Rock: Island and identity in Barbados

In his poem “The Schooner Flight”, Derek Walcott has his narrator Shabine invite the reader to “Open the map” of the Caribbean, commenting “More islands there, man,/than peas on a tin plate, all different size [...]”¹ This essay attempts to give some reflections on what living on an island – a very “singular island” – has meant to the people of one Caribbean country, and the part that simple facts of topography may have played in shaping their sense of identity.

“Barbados – a singular island!” was a slogan used by the Barbados Tourist Board in the 1970s. It was, in part, intended to discourage the belief, still sometimes found among people not familiar with the Caribbean, that Barbados is a group of islands rather than an island on its own. The mistake has its origin in the fact that older writers referred to Barbadoes, or “the Barbadoes”, a term derived from “Los Barbados”, the form first found in the earliest references to the island in Spanish documents of the sixteenth century. The name appears to mean “the bearded ones”, but whether this is in fact the case, and, if so, whether it refers to bearded men, bearded fig trees, or the appearance of the waves breaking on the coral reefs which fringe the island, are matters which continue to be disputed.² The similarly named Barbuda, which

¹ Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948-1984* (New York: Noonday Press, 1986), p. 360. “The Schooner Flight” was published in the author’s earlier collection *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979).

² See entry on “Barbados (name)” in Sean Carrington, Henry Fraser, John Gilmore and Addinton Forde, *A-Z of Barbados Heritage* (Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2003), p. 16.

forms part of the country of Antigua and Barbuda, is far to the north, in the Leeward Islands of the Caribbean, something which does not stop overseas mail destined for Barbados being mis-sent there. Confusion over names also ensures that mail for Barbados sometimes gets sent to the Bahamas (which is a group of islands) or to Bermuda, which (contrary to widespread belief) is not in the Caribbean at all, but in the North Atlantic.

The small, offshore Pelican Island (just large enough for the few buildings which enabled it to be used as a quarantine station) was joined to the mainland of Barbados during the construction of the Deep Water Harbour (1956-61). Culpepper Island is the rather grand name given to a geographical feature just off the east coast of Barbados, which was more appropriately referred to on an eighteenth-century map as “Culpepper’s little isle”, the name deriving from a local landowner. It is close enough to the shore for it to be easily reached by wading at low tide, and it is no more than about 30 metres or 100 feet long. I have swum round it, though this is not something I would recommend, as strong currents and sharp rocks await the foolhardy on the sea-side. There are a few smaller rocks on or within sight of the shore which rise to the dignity of names, but they can hardly be said to affect the status of Barbados itself as “a singular island.”³

While usually regarded as a Caribbean country, Barbados is well to the east of the main arc of islands in the Eastern Caribbean, 160 kilometres from its nearest neighbour, St. Vincent. In the days before modern systems of navigation, this meant that it was not always easy to find – one seventeenth-century English visitor said

The Barbados may well admitt of this simile, to be like sixpence throwne downe vpon newmarkett heath, & you should command such a one to goe & finde itt out.⁴

³ See the entries (both illustrated) on “Culpepper Island” and “Pelican Island” in Carrington, et al., *A-Z of Barbados Heritage*, pp. 61, 150.

⁴ “The voyage of Sir Henry Colt” (1631), in V. T. Harlow, ed., *Colonising Expeditions to the West Indies and Guiana, 1623-1667* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1925), pp. 54-102, at p. 63.

Nevertheless, for some three centuries its location, and the prevailing winds of the North Atlantic, made it often the first port of call for shipping going from Britain and Ireland to the Caribbean and South America. Barbados was also likely to be the first port made after leaving Africa by ships engaged in the transatlantic slave trade – one of the best known slave narratives, that of Olaudah Equiano, describes in some detail his arrival in Barbados and sale there before he was trans-shipped to North America.⁵ This was certainly a major factor in the development of the wealth which Barbados owed to its position as a mercantile entrepôt as well as to being a plantation colony producing crops for export. It also gave the island a strategic significance: during the many wars between different colonial powers in the Caribbean from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, Barbados was often a headquarters for British military and naval forces, and derived economic benefit from this. By the time the aeroplane and modern telecommunications reduced the importance of the prevailing winds, a firm foundation had been created for the continuing development of Barbados in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as a centre for export-oriented assembly and light manufacturing industries, for regional distribution, and for service industries such as data processing and insurance.

The suggestion that the island's position as the first port of call for slave ships caused the strongest slaves to be sold there, and created a gene pool which has caused the remarkable success which Barbados has enjoyed in the sport of international bodybuilding, is perhaps a little more fanciful.⁶ However, there is a further point worth making about location. In the days of sailing ships, it was relatively easy to get from

⁵ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, 2 vols., (London: 1789); facsimile reprint with new introduction by Paul Edwards, London: Dawsons, 1969), I, 83-90. The researches of Vincent Carretta have cast doubt on the authenticity of Equiano's account of his early life, but if this passage was an invention by Equiano, it would appear to have been intended as representative of the experience of many victims of the slave trade. See Vincent Carretta, *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

⁶ See entry on "Bodybuilding", in Carrington, et al., *A-Z of Barbados Heritage*, p. 27.

Barbados to other Caribbean islands, less easy to get from those other islands to Barbados. Regular communication, commercial relations and political ties connected Barbados with Great Britain and, to a lesser extent, North America (which was a major source of plantation supplies in the period before the American War of Independence), rather than with other Caribbean islands. While impossible to prove or to quantify with any precision, it would seem likely that this relative isolation has contributed to the strong sense of local identity which has existed in Barbados among all sections of the population at least since the eighteenth century. One of the island's leading planters, Robert Haynes, General of Militia and Speaker of the House of Assembly in the early nineteenth century, said “ ’tis to me the first country in the world”⁷ while at much the same period a visiting observer noted that the slaves of Barbados “proudly arrogate a superiority over the Negroes of the other islands.”⁸ Outsiders have occasionally found this excessive. In 1876 the Bishop of Barbados – an Englishman – allegedly

compared Barbadians generally to the white snails of Hans Christian Anderson, who, living under burdock leaves upon which the rain-drops pattered, flattered themselves that the world consisted of white snails and that they were the world.⁹

Nevertheless, such critics do not seem ever to have pondered why what they would have called patriotism in a large country should be condemned as bombast in a small one.

Barbadians, perhaps especially those living overseas, sometimes refer to their homeland as “The Rock” (as in the enquiry “You been back to The Rock lately?”). Apparently self-deprecating references to the size

⁷ Quoted in Karl Watson, *The Civilised Island, Barbados: A social history 1750-1816* (Barbados: 1979), p. 52.

⁸ George Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies...*, 3 vols., (London: 1806), II, 76. Pinckard visited Barbados in 1796.

⁹ This is from a summary (by an avowedly hostile third party) of a speech by Bishop Mitchinson, as reported in *The Times* (Barbados), 19 February 1876; quoted in John Gilmore, *The Toiler of the Sees: A Life of John Mitchinson, Bishop of Barbados* (Barbados: Barbados National Trust, 1987), p. 60.

of the island go back a long way – in 1842 the upper house of the local legislature, in an address to the new governor, referred to Barbados as “this dot in the ocean.”¹⁰ However, size is a matter of perception, and can be perceived in different ways. When Barbadians refer to “small islands”, the reference is often to some of their Caribbean neighbours, and implies a comment about perceived levels of development, not a statement about geographical area. Somewhere like St. Lucia or Dominica can be referred to as a “small island”, though both are in fact considerably larger than Barbados. Barbados is not, in this sense, a “small island” (though citizens of some other Caribbean territories, such as Jamaica or Trinidad and Tobago, might disagree). Nevertheless, the facts are that, at its greatest extent, Barbados is approximately 21 miles (34 kilometres) long and 14 miles (23 kilometres) wide, giving an area of about 167 square miles or 431 square kilometres. The traditional comparison for British readers has been with the Isle of Wight, off the south coast of England, which is slightly smaller, at 147 square miles or 381 square kilometres. Madeira is rather larger, at 741 square kilometres or about 286 square miles. If you would like an American comparison, the *CIA World Factbook* says that Barbados is “2.5 times the size of Washington, DC”.¹¹

Before considering possible effects of the island’s size, some other aspects of its geography require mention. Barbados is largely of coral formation, though in what is known as the Scotland District (about one-seventh of the total area of the island) underlying sedimentary and oceanic deposits have been forced upwards and erosion has removed the coral cap. While the Scotland District is hilly, Barbados has a whole is relatively flat, with gentle rises from the shore in most places to higher levels inland. The white sandy beaches found along much of the coast are an important part of the island’s attraction for

¹⁰ Address of the Legislative Council to Governor Sir Charles Grey, 11 April 1842, quoted in Sir Robert H. Schomburgk, *The History of Barbados...* (London: 1848; facsimile ed., London: Frank Cass, 1971), p. 498.

¹¹ <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/bb.html>, accessed 26 September 2006.

visitors, and sustain a tourist industry which has grown from modest beginnings in the later nineteenth century to being the main earner of foreign exchange and a major source of employment. The highest point, Mount Hillaby (more or less on the edge of the Scotland District), is only 1,116 feet (340 metres) above sea-level. In comparison with the rivers found in some other Caribbean islands or the three great rivers of Guyana, Joe's River and the Constitution River in Barbados are mere streamlets, though it is true that the latter at least is not what it once was – while modern engineering works have turned the Constitution River into little more than a storm-drain, it was still possible to row boats up it for a considerable distance in the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, fissures in the coral form numerous gullies across the island, and there are massive underground cave systems providing natural reservoirs which preserve a significant proportion of the island's rainfall after it has been filtered through the rock. These supply a few natural springs and the system of piped water which began in 1861 and now supplies drinkable water to virtually every household in the country. In the past, rainwater was also stored in numerous natural and artificial ponds, many of which have been allowed to dry up as the population came to rely on the piped water system.

To the relatively flat terrain and the availability of water, must be added the fact that at various points the island has benefited from the fall of considerable quantities of volcanic ash borne on the winds from eruptions in neighbouring islands. The eruptions in Martinique and St Vincent in 1902 and 1903, for example, scattered an estimated average of 34 tons of ash over every acre of Barbadian soil, and these and other eruptions in historic and prehistoric times have contributed significantly to the fertility of the non-volcanic island.¹²

Circumstances created an island ideal for agriculture. The Amerindian population of the pre-Columbian period cultivated cassava and fished the in-shore reefs. The English settlers who arrived in the early seventeenth century appear to have found Barbados uninhabited.

¹² See entry on "May Dust" in Carrington, et al., *A-Z of Barbados Heritage*, p. 124.

Within a few years of their settlement in 1627, they had destroyed nearly all the forest which covered most of the island in their efforts to create an economy based on the cultivation of cash crops for export. A combination of factors too complex to explore here in the space available meant that initial experiments with tobacco, ginger, indigo and cotton gave way to sugar, which became the mainstay of the island's economy from the 1660s to the 1960s.

The soil of Barbados was, and is, particularly suited to the cultivation of sugar. In turn, the nature of the sugar-cane plant and the requirements of the process which extracted sugar for export from the plant led to the consolidation of land-owning in Barbados so that, while the small proprietor did not disappear entirely, by the later seventeenth century most of the land in the island was absorbed into a comparatively small number of sugar-plantations, a pattern which continued virtually unchanged into the early twentieth century. Sugar required labour, and (again for a number of reasons) by the later seventeenth century the importation of indentured servants from Europe had given way to the importation of slaves from Africa, creating a population which was, and remains, one of predominantly African descent.

The intensive cultivation of the soil, and the persistence of patterns of land-ownership which until the middle of the twentieth century gave almost exclusive political and economic power to a small and predominantly white group, meant that, long after the abolition of slavery in 1834, there were few opportunities outside the plantation system for most of the population. Nevertheless, the population continued to grow, and even in the mid-nineteenth century the population density of Barbados was matter for comment. The English novelist Anthony Trollope, who visited the Caribbean in late 1858 and the first half of 1859, claimed to have been told that the population of Barbados “was larger than that of China, but my informant of course meant by the square foot. He could hardly have counted by the square mile in Barbados.”¹³ The

¹³ Anthony Trollope, *The West Indies and the Spanish Main*, fifth edition (London: 1862), p. 194 (first published 1859).

resident population is currently estimated by the Barbados Government Information Service as “approximately 270,000”.¹⁴ This gives an average density of more than 1,600 persons per square mile, or over 625 persons per square kilometre. As significant areas are still devoted to agriculture, it will be appreciated that the population of residential areas can be very dense indeed. (I will merely mention in passing that there has now for many years also been a very high level of private vehicle ownership to give a hint of the infrastructural problems which result.)

The size of the island, the nature and history of the plantation system, and the resulting population density, are perhaps the most important factors in creating two apparently contradictory aspects of the national character (if such a thing can be said to exist). On the one hand, Barbadians have traditionally been viewed by people from other parts of the Caribbean as more conservative, more conformist – dull, even. Many stereotypes do contain an element of truth, and it was certainly the case that in Barbados getting ahead in life, or even just getting by, often depended on not upsetting those in positions of power and influence (ranging from the plantation owners to the local clergy of the Church of England and the village schoolmaster), and that this was probably the case to a greater extent than in some other Caribbean societies where there were more opportunities for, for example, the comparative independence of peasant proprietorship. However, there must have been many like the character of Uncle Tom as described by the Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite, who held his hat in hand to hide his heart.¹⁵ Another negative consequence of the island’s size and density of population – and one which persists to the present day – is the way in which everybody appears to know everybody else’s business, and the widespread fondness for gossip and rumour, which is not always reliable.

¹⁴ BGIS website, <http://www.barbados.gov.bb/society.htm>, accessed 26 September 2006.

¹⁵ Edward [Kamau] Brathwaite, *Rights of Passage* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 14.

On the other hand, it must have been exactly the same circumstances, the same lack of other opportunities, which created the spirit of enterprise which has historically led so many Barbadians to emigrate. During the period from 1904 to 1914, for example, perhaps as many as 60,000 Barbadians, or about one-third of the island's total population at the time, went to Panama to work on the construction of the canal. It is commonly said that, wherever you go in the world, you are bound to find a Barbadian. Nevertheless, emotional attachment to "The Rock" can survive a separation of many years and many miles. In 1841, for example, the survivors of a group of former slaves from Barbados, who had been exiled from the island for their part in the great slave rebellion of 1816, and who had ended up in Sierra Leone, petitioned Queen Victoria to "be allowed to return back to Barbados, the place of our Nativity."¹⁶ At the present day, as well as historically, while many emigrants remain overseas, many send money back to relatives, and many physically return to Barbados, often with new ideas as well as economic capital. It was this phenomenon which, in the early twentieth century, began the transformation of the island's politics and economy which led to Barbados becoming an independent nation in 1966. Modern Barbadians have developed a democratic society enjoying a degree of stability and prosperity enviable by the standards of many other, much larger countries – and which they themselves regard as ample justification for the national motto of "Pride and Industry." Conformity and conservatism can still be found, but now co-exist with radical thinking, entrepreneurship and astonishing artistic creativity. Many things have contributed to all this, not least the very large part of government spending which has consistently been devoted to education for the last half a century, but the "singular island" itself, and the relationship it has created with its inhabitants, have certainly played a part over the years.

¹⁶ See entry on "Rebellion of 1816", in Carrington, et al., *A-Z of Barbados Heritage*, pp. 164-5.

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