

Island

HOW ISLANDS TRANSFORM THE WORLD



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Elliott & Thompson

Chapter One

First Islanders

SETTLERS AND STORYTELLERS



“JAMAICA, THE MOST considerable as well as by far the most valuable of the British West India islands, is situated in the Atlantic Ocean, among what are called by geographers the Greater Antilles [. . .] Jamaica is nearly of an oval form; 140 English miles in length, and in its broadest part about 50. It is the third in size of the islands of the Archipelago. It is bounded on the east by the island of St. Domingo [Hispaniola], from which it is separated by the channel called by English seamen the Windward passage; by Cuba on the north; by the Bay of Honduras on the west; and by Cartagena in New Spain [now Colombia] on the south [. . .] The island is crossed longitudinally by an elevated ridge, called the Blue Mountains. What is called the Blue Mountain Peak rises 7,431 feet above the level of the sea. The

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precipices are interspersed with beautiful savannahs, and are clothed with vast forests of mahogany, lignum vitae, iron wood, logwood, brazilletto, etc. On the north of the island, at a small distance from the sea, the land rises in small round topped hills, which are covered with spontaneous groves of pimento. Under the shade of these is a beautiful rich turf. This side of the island is also well watered, every valley having its rivulet, many of which tumble from overhanging cliffs into the sea. The background in this prospect, consisting of a vast amphitheatre of forests, melting gradually into the distant Blue Mountains, is very striking. On the south coast the face of the country is different; it is more sublime, but not so pleasing. The mountains here approach the sea in immense ridges; but there are even here cultivated spots on the sides of the hills, and in many parts vast savannahs—covered with sugar canes, stretching from the sea to the foot of the mountain—relieve and soften the savage grandeur of the prospect.”

—*Edinburgh Encyclopaedia* (1830)

“[DECEMBER 4, 1844] My first sight of Jamaica was one that I never can forget. There was a conical mass, darkly blue, above the dense bed of clouds that hung around its sides, and enveloped all beneath [the] towering elevation [of Blue Mountain Peak] [. . .] Night soon fell. Many lights were seen in the scattered cottages, and here and there a fire blazed up from the beach, or a torch in the hand of some fisherman was carried from place to place. My mind was full of Columbus, and of his feelings on that eventful night, when the coast of Guanahani [San Salvador, also known as Watlings Island, in the Bahamas] lay spread out before him with its moving lights, and proud anticipations. So did I contemplate the tropical island before me, its romance

heightened by the indefiniteness and obscurity in which it lay [. . .] The well-known comparison by which Columbus is said to have given Queen Isabella an idea of Jamaica—a sheet of paper crumpled up tightly in the hand, and then partially stretched out—occurred to me, and I could not but admire its striking appropriateness.”

—Philip Henry Gosse, *A Naturalist's Sojourn in Jamaica* (1851)

Like many islanders the world over, Jamaicans often refer to their island as the Rock; and in the beginning Jamaica was just that, a rock rising above the surface of the sea. Long after its geological history had begun, its natural history followed, with biological life forming in the soupy sea around while on the land plants developed over millions of years until eventually the first tree rose up into the air.

Jamaica would one day be covered by trees; but before that it was shaped by volcanic rocks, which were eroded by wind and water and by limestone produced with the slow disintegration of the shells of marine life, including coral. This limestone then dissolved into pockets and purses called karst formations, the sinkholes and springs and caves and underground reservoirs and cone-shaped hills and honeycomb sides of Jamaica's Cockpit Country, one of the most remarkable examples of such a limestone landscape in the world.

Then, in a familiar island compact, Jamaica's geography conspired with its geology to give the island a rich diversity of flora and fauna, fascinating travelers and residents alike from ancient times. Such variety remains one of the most reliable markers of island identity. Temperate or tropical, on almost every ocean island around the

world there are thousands of plant and animal species, some tiny and hidden away and others portly and prominent, some resident and others just passing through; and over time they create their own island conditions, building a world in which they uniquely belong and bringing nurture and nature together in what Jamaicans might call a rocksteady rhythm. Typical of mountainous islands with windward and leeward shores, Jamaica has two climates; in the northeast, exposed to the wind, it is wet and warm, while in the lee of the mountains to the southwest the weather is drier and cooler. This makes for an even more remarkable range of species, including an exceptional variety of ferns and fruits and berries—and of birds to feed on them.

Birds and islands have a long association, for until very, very recently in the history of the world, birds were the only creatures (other than insects and bats) that could *fly* over the water to reach islands. The Chinese word for an island combines the ancient ideogram of a bird with that of a mountain—and measured from the seabed, every ocean island is a mountain. In this imagining, an island is a place for a bird to land; and birds hide out or hover about all over Jamaica—it has the highest number of native avian species anywhere in the Caribbean. There are finches and flycatchers, herons and egrets, black-billed and yellow-billed parrots, mockingbirds and kingbirds and the magnificent frigate bird, with its scarlet throat that balloons in breeding season. There are whistling ducks and blue and yellow and black and white warblers, elaenias (called Sarah Birds) and euphonias (called Cho-Cho Quits), an owl called Patoo and an oriole called Banana Katie. The island is also home to a little green and red tody called Rasta Bird, a cuckoo called Old Woman Bird

and another called Old Man Bird, and to doves and lots of crows, including the rightly named jabbering crow. And the John Crow, which isn't really a crow at all but a turkey vulture (graceful or disgraceful, depending on one's point of view) that has found a place in Jamaican folklore. There are hummingbirds, especially the so-called Doctor Bird, found only on the island and celebrated in Ian Fleming's James Bond story *For Your Eyes Only* (1960), where the opening words speak of "the most beautiful bird in Jamaica, and some say the most beautiful bird in the world, the streamer-tail or 'doctor' hummingbird." It is now the national bird of Jamaica. And there are over a hundred species of butterflies, each of exquisite color and design, including the giant swallowtail—largest in the Americas and native to the island.

Green and brown and croaking lizards live in Jamaica, along with a few snakes and one species of crocodile (which appears on the national coat of arms). Turtles have lived on and around Jamaica for millions of years, from the time when the sea was relatively shallow; and now there are green turtles and hawksbills and loggerheads and leatherbacks, bringing the sea and the land together in their amphibious lives. In fact, certain reptiles that can manage significant water crossings are usually among the first animals on any "new" island. Perhaps as importantly, reptiles can go for long periods without eating anything at all, absorbing heat passively from the sun and the ambient air rather than having to generate body heat internally like mammals and birds—which requires a lot of food.

Among the marine mammals, the manatees, or "sea cows," are relatively scarce around Jamaica these days; but they have made their home close to shore forever, and would have been easy pickings for

the earliest human settlers. There are still plenty of dolphins and some whales, including sperm whales and humpbacks, sharing the waters with stingrays and sharks, barracudas and eels, marlin and tuna. Around the reefs there are fish with intriguing names—grunts and groupers, snappers and doctorfish, squirrelfish and goatfish and triggerfish and angelfish—and in some parts of the Caribbean Sea the unusual flying fish, breaking the surface at speeds up to forty miles per hour and gliding on pectoral and pelvic fins for distances from a hundred feet to a quarter mile. Some say it flies over the waves to escape predators; others believe it does it just for fun.

The trees that originally grew on Jamaica, from the dry lowlands to the rainy valleys and up onto the steep hillsides, were drastically reduced—in both number and variety—with the arrival of humans, who cut timber for building and cleared land for agriculture. But this opened up spaces for new plant varieties, some introduced by travelers and some brought there by chance, on the winds and waves or by bird or boat. There are tamarinds whose seeds traveled from Asia, breadfruits brought from Tahiti by William Bligh (the notorious commander of the *Bounty*), and sapodilla (better known in Jamaica as naseberry) with its delicious fruit and sap called chicle, tapped every six years to make chewing gum. Jamaica has flowering trees such as the native poui, which has a spectacular yellow-gold blossom that lasts only a short while, falling in an apron around the base of the tree; and the blue mahoe, which displays trumpet-shaped, hibiscus-like flowers at different times of the year, its wood prized for cabinet-making and the crafting of musical instruments, and its bark used in Cuba to wrap cigars.

Other trees have various uses. The *lignum vitae*'s sapwood was once a remedy for syphilis, and its gum is still used in the treatment of arthritis. There is a tree called Duppy Machete, with floral petals deemed suitable for dealing with duppies, West Indian spirits of the dead. The beautiful frangipani has a sweet scent but a poisonous sap, while the fruit of the ackee is poisonous at the wrong time of harvesting but delicious at the right stage. It is now the foundation of Jamaica's national dish, ackee and salt (cod) fish. There are cashew trees, with a pear-shaped fruit that ends in a kernel that is the nut, and soursop and coconut and pawpaw and mango trees, along with avocado and banana and cocoa and nutmeg, none of them native but all now widely dispersed on the islands of the Caribbean. Nutmeg was an icon of the spice trade, which once centered around a group of islands in Indonesia but was eventually transplanted to Grenada and other West Indian islands. The berries of the indigenous pimenta tree seemed to early European travelers to combine the taste of nutmeg, cinnamon, and clove, and for a long time Jamaica supplied most of the world with allspice, as it was called.

Mangroves grow on many of the Caribbean island shores, as they do in many parts of the world, extending the reach of islands by walking out to sea with their prop roots and capturing sediment and plants that will eventually shape the swamp into an expanded shoreline. There are casuarinas, which have come from afar but made the Caribbean their home, and sea grapes, with their leathery leaves and sour-grape fruit. They may have been the first plant seen by Columbus when he reached what he thought were the Spice Islands of Indonesia—and the smell of these trees, along with the sight of

their leaves blown from the shore and carried by the sea, would have been noticed by sailors long before any island came into view.

Anthurium, bougainvillea, Easter lily, wild scallion, and heliconia—called wild banana—are among the flowering plants native to Jamaica, along with a mimosa called Shame-Me-Lady, so sensitive that a light touch or a slight breeze cause the leaf stalks to collapse and the leaflets to close. One indigenous plant called Ram Goat Dash Along makes a healing bush tea, while cerasee makes a bitter tea that is also used as a body wash. Pomegranate and frangipani shrubs are common, along with Duppy Cho-Cho, which may harbor bad spirits. Marigolds and fuchsia grow in the mountains. Jamaica is also home to the greatest variety of orchid species in the Caribbean. They originated in Africa, like the enslaved men, women, and children who were later transported to the island, but many of the orchids were brought to the Americas as seed dust on the Sahara winds.



All humans on the islands of the world are settlers, though when they first traveled there, and why and how and from where, is often uncertain, or else explained in the myths that make up the history of first islanders (and which usually include stories about the first plants and animals as well). We can be sure that some humans came by choice, some reached by chance, and coercion played a part for others. Often islands provided sanctuary for those fleeing hunger or war, or seeking solitude—saintly or otherwise. Islands saw the arrival both of seasonal workers and of enslaved laborers, and of settlers looking for a different life, establishing new societies, and exploiting