

ABSTRACTS OF JAMAICA WILLS

1625-1792

in the

BRITISH MUSEUM

(Additional Manuscripts 34181)

Introduction

by

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1972

## I PROVENANCE

This is a collection of 312 abstracts of wills of English colonists or propertyholders in Jamaica during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The wills were abstracted by Vernona I. C. Smith (Mrs Sidney Smith) of Barnes, Middlesex, and copied into a folio volume together with miscellaneous genealogical notes relating to the early English colonists in the West Indies. The whole volume is in the hand of Mrs Smith. Her signature, dated 1888, can be found on the first folio. The British Museum bought the volume from Mrs Smith in 1892.

## 2 ABSTRACTS OF JAMAICA WILLS 1625-1792

Mrs Smith found these wills in the Principal Probate Registry at Somerset House, London. Her sample is small, yet useful, since the voluminous probate records for Jamaica have been little studied and constitute a prime source for the social historian. Her abstracts have interest in themselves and they show what sort of social data can be culled from Jamaican wills of this early period (the chief collection is in the Island Registry Office at Spanish Town, Jamaica).

In abstracting each will, Mrs Smith recorded the name of the testator, the names of beneficiaries, executors and witnesses, the date of the will, the residence and occupation of the testator. In this group of wills, 17 per cent date from the seventeenth century, 45 per cent from the first half of the eighteenth century and 38 per cent from the second half of the eighteenth century; thus Mrs Smith's collection spans the rise and maturation of the Jamaica sugar industry. She has not given us a random sample of island colonists for most of the testators were big planters or merchants. Only half of them lived in Jamaica and as many as 28 per cent lived in London.

Mrs Smith summarized the disposition of each estate and quoted interesting particulars. Family relationships are carefully noted. Some of the testators had relatives in the mainland colonies but the islanders' familial ties with the mother country were much stronger. These abstracts reveal a high degree of inter-marriage among the leading island families, a large number of absentee planters, a high mortality rate among the islanders (many widows and

few surviving children) and a good many illegitimate children, both black and white. If Mrs Smith was trying to trace her husband's family, she may have been disturbed to find that Samuel Smith (d 1775) of Spanish Town divided his fortune between a nephew and a natural son, born to his housekeeper. There is also some interesting data on Jamaican race relations. A number of testators freed their favourite slaves. William Bonner (d 1714), having sired four mulatto children, bequeathed them twenty of his negro slaves. Jacob Ricketts (d 1754) directed that 'the Child my Negroe Ancilla is now big with, if a Mulatto to be freed and at 21 £100 or 3 Negroes'.

### 3 CONTENTS OF THE FILM

The 312 wills abstracted on this film are presented in neither alphabetical nor chronological order but there is an index (ff 231-232) at the close of the volume. The surnames of notable testators include Baeston, Bernard, Beckford, Heming, James, Lloyd, Long, Lynch, Modyford, Molesworth, Price, Rose, Sutton, Swimmer, Smith, Turner, Vassall and Whitehorne.

The film also contains (ff 183-223) miscellaneous notes on other colonial documents, mainly West Indian, which Mrs Smith abstracted from the Public Record Office. These are:

- 1 an incomplete abstract of the compensation claims which the planters of St Christopher filed after the French sacked their island in 1706
- 2 a survey of Jamaica landholding in 1670, published in Calendar of State Papers, Colonial, 1669-1674, no. 270, pp. 98-104
- 3 baptismal records from three St Christopher parishes, 1721-1730
- 4 a few indentures from the Close Rolls
- 5 headings of Guinea documents, 1649-1650
- 6 headings of Carolina documents, 1663-1673



- Noel B. Livingston Sketch pedigrees of some of the early settlers in Jamaica compiled from the records of the Court of Chancery of the island, with a list of inhabitants in 1670 and other matter relative to the early history of the same (Kingston: Educational Supply Co. 1909)
- Edward Long The history of Jamaica, or general survey of the ancient and modern state of that island, with reflections on its situation, settlements, inhabitants, climate (3 vols, London, 1774)
- Vere L. Oliver, ed. Caribbeana, being miscellaneous papers relating to the history, genealogy, topography and antiquities of the British West Indies (6 vols, London, 1909-19)
- Richard Pares War and trade in the West Indies, 1739-1763 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936; Cass, 1963)
- Orlando Patterson The sociology of slavery: an analysis of the origins, development and structure of negro slave society in Jamaica (MacGibbon & Kee, 1967)

Frank W. Pitman

The development of the British West Indies, 1700-1763 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1917; Cass, 1967)

Lowell J. Ragatz

The fall of the planter class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833: a study in social and economic history (New York: Century Co. 1929; New York: Octagon Books, 1963)

Richard B. Sheridan

Sugar and slavery: an economic history of the British West Indies, 1623-1775 (Ginn, 1972)

'The wealth of Jamaica in the eighteenth century', Economic History Review, 2nd series, XVIII (1965) 292-311.

Philip Wright

Monumental inscriptions of Jamaica (Society of Genealogists, 1966)