

BAHAMIAN SOCIETY IN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Class, Race, and Ethnicity

Bahamian society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was deeply divided by race. Despite the gradual changes that occurred in post-emancipation years, the fundamental structure of the society had not been altered. The black majority remained dominated and socially ignored by the white officials and elite mercantile class. New Providence had an expanding middle class that was largely disregarded by the ruling clique yet in turn looked down on the laboring black classes. This chapter explores the complex structure of this society and the interrelationships between Bahamian classes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Colin Hughes, in his penetrating monograph *Race and Politics in the Bahamas*, refines Braithwaite's hierarchical model, M. G. Smith's refinement of Furnivall's concept of the "plural society," and Lowenthal's theory of "class hierarchy," "social pluralism," and "cultural pluralism."¹ Hughes argues that "the Bahamian experience is too deviant, even from the norm of the British Caribbean, to support any attempt to establish new theory or even to go very far towards endorsing established theory."² He finds that within M. G. Smith's distinction of five dimensions of the color concept, *structural color*—that is, "an abstract analytic category reflecting the distributions and types of power, authority, knowledge, wealth which together define and constitute the social framework"—is the most important for examining political change in the Bahamas.³ Because social change has in fact depended to a large extent on political change, Hughes's contention can be accepted in examining the

social history of the Bahamas. He further asserted that among the variables listed by Smith, “wealth has had pre-eminent place in the Bahamas,” especially after Prohibition.⁴

Wealth attracted power and authority, and therefore in the Bahamas racial differences were linked to economic relationships. Racial difference rather than class difference “determined the predominant features of social, economic, and political relationships.”⁵

Nassau

In analyzing Bahamian society it is necessary to distinguish between that of Nassau, the “miniature metropolis,” and that of the Out Islands, rural in character. The Out Islands settlements themselves showed variations and need to be examined separately according to racial distribution.

Of all the nineteenth-century writers, Liston D. Powles, British stipendiary and circuit magistrate, perhaps gave the most penetrating account of social life in Nassau at that time. He vividly described how the society in the mini-metropolis revolved around Government Hill. The governor was the most important man in the colony, and the woman who presided at Government House, whether his wife, sister, or daughter, was recognized as the leader of the colony’s social life. Powles explained that Nassau society could be divided into the “Upper ten,” those eligible for invitation to Government House on all occasions, and the “lower Upper ten,” those invited only on state occasions. Occasionally members of the respectable middle class (whites and browns) were invited to Government House. Despite the recognition of a nonwhite middle class, white society, according to Powles, considered anyone who was admittedly mixed race as belonging to the “lower class.”⁶ Although the governor and his family formed part of the white elite ruling class, the governor was often critical of the local whites. Governor Ambrose Shea, for example, in commenting on the isolation of the Out Islands, criticized the poorly organized communication system, concluding that the Out Islanders were “slaves of the petty traders.”⁷ Governor Haynes-Smith also complained to the Colonial Office of the plight of the Out Islanders and the iniquitous truck system.⁸ The governor, however, acted as a mediator between the official class, the local whites, the mixed-race, and blacks. Magistrate Powles thought he had Governor Henry Blake’s support in the well-known Lightbourne case (discussed later), but when local whites brought specific charges against him, the governor yielded in order to keep the peace.⁹

British officials also formed part of the official white elite sector, including the colonial secretary, attorney general, receiver general, chief justice, stipendiary and circuit magistrates, commandant of police, resident surgeon, and surveyor general. Most of these posts were held by Britons, but occasionally white Bahamians also held high office. In 1897 Ormond D. Malcolm, for example, held concurrently the posts of attorney general, speaker of the House of Assembly, and acting head of the judiciary.¹⁰ As already noted, some of the local elite regarded the British officials with contempt, as was common all over the British West Indies and perhaps elsewhere in the empire. Chief Justice Yelverton in a letter to the *Nassau Guardian* on 4 May 1892 charged that the health of Nassau was threatened by the storage of coal in the Board of Trade premises on Bay Street. He contended that the poisonous gases released by the coal would cause illnesses, among them yellow fever.¹¹ In reply to this warning, an anonymous writer signing himself “Colonist” sarcastically suggested in the same newspaper that offices for such English officials as Yelverton should be built over coal, and the resultant fever should be “regarded as Providence to clear the atmosphere of the civil service of some officials who are exhaled and emanate from Downing Street.”¹² The chief justice regarded the letter as being in contempt of court. When the *Nassau Guardian* editor Alfred E. Moseley, son of its English-born founder, refused to reveal who the writer was, Yelverton fined him £65 and imprisoned him until the fine was paid.¹³ The governor ordered Moseley’s release after the editor had served thirty hours in jail, and it was reported that more than three thousand people accompanied Moseley from the prison to his home, some in carriages, others on foot. For two days business in the town was wholly suspended.¹⁴

Such antipathy toward Chief Justice Yelverton and other British officials did not negate the strong loyalty the local creole whites felt to Great Britain and the British Empire. In spite of the Bahamas’ proximity to and commercial ties with the United States, the official life of Nassau tended to be more English than American. While newly arrived English people said “how *American* we are in custom, speech and dress,” American visitors commented with even greater justice “how thoroughly *English* Nassau is.”¹⁵

Bahamian society was miniscule, and according to outsiders such as Austen Chamberlain, an investor in sisal cultivation, “not very interesting.”¹⁶ An Anglican priest remarked, “It is a little kingdom of its own.”¹⁷ The leading citizens formed a close-knit group who controlled every aspect of Bahamian life. Everyone who mattered was known to everyone else, and snobbery was rife. Most male members of the elite were engaged in commerce—usually

import and export business—or were lawyers, and many held political office, either officially appointed or elected.

One of the most prominent merchants was ardent Methodist R. H. Sawyer, CMG, who had gone into business with his brother-in-law Ramon Menendez in 1849 and had profited handsomely during the American Civil War. He was a founder of the Bank of Nassau and became its president and managing director. Besides being involved in the usual import and export business, he provided coal and water to visiting steamships and was agent for the major shipping lines between Nassau, New York, Cuba, and Miami and for the recently formed Inter-Insular Mail Line. His success in politics assisted him in his successful business enterprises. He entered the political arena in 1858 when he was elected representative for Harbour Island. Eight years later he was the winner of the seat for the town of Nassau and served in the House of Assembly for twenty-four years, gaining the confidence of members and influence over “matters affecting the welfare of the colony.”¹⁸ R. H. Sawyer was later appointed to the Executive Council (1869) and Legislative Council (1879).

Several other leading whites had qualified professionally as lawyers, physicians, or dentists or were local publishers, and the achievements of some were outstanding by any standard. The grandson of Michael Malcolm, founder of the Presbyterian Church in Nassau, and the son of Sir Ormond Malcolm, first Bahamian chief justice, Harcourt Malcolm read law at Lincoln’s Inn and was called to the English Bar in 1899. Returning to Nassau, he was called to the local Bar and established a practice in Nassau.¹⁹ Another individual who achieved local distinction was Joseph Baird Albury. Born in Harbour Island in 1876, he attended Queen’s College high school in Nassau and Wycliff College in Gloucester, England, and qualified as a medical doctor at St. Mary’s Hospital in 1902. On returning to Nassau he engaged in private practice and stood in for other doctors from time to time at the Nassau hospital.²⁰ Dr. J. B. Albury’s father, the Hon. Joseph Benson Albury, was also a physician.

Other notable whites served as career civil servants, such as Percy William Duncombe Armbrister, who began as a clerk in the post office in 1878. By 1893 he was warehouse keeper and examining officer (comptroller of customs). He also became a resident justice and served in several districts during the last years of the nineteenth century. Returning to Nassau, he was appointed receiver general and treasurer in 1916 and also served as a member of the Legislative and Executive councils.²¹ Among the white merchants was George B. Adderley who, besides exporting sponge, dye-woods, and salt and

dealing wholesale in “provisions, breadstuffs, liquor, wines, lumber, shingles and cabinet woods,” was agent for the Northern Fire and Life Assurance Company of London.²²

The white elite maintained a firm grip over the economy and the political and administrative machinery. Further entrenching their power were their close family relationships. Methodist missionary T. Raspas commented that “white people here have intermarried for many generations past and are all related to each other in most instances in several ways.”²³ Powles asserted that “the House of Assembly is little less than a family gathering of Nassau whites, nearly all of whom are related to each other, either by blood or marriage.”²⁴ Among the leading white families interrelated by marriage were the Adderleys, Malcolms, Duncombes, and Armbristers. At least one member of each family held a political or administrative office in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Members of the white elite of Nassau emulated the upper and middle classes of England. Extremely proud of their British traditions, they appeared somewhat proud, supercilious, and exclusive.²⁵ They regarded their titled members and those nominated for civic honors as belonging to “the nobility of the Empire.”²⁶ Their society revolved around the official life of the mini-metropolis, various recreational clubs, and the Anglican, Methodist, or Presbyterian churches.²⁷ Social life for the upper class was a series of private visits, the occasional dinner party, picnics, dances, clubs, and participation in various sports, including cricket, rugby football, polo, and tennis. Powles was critical of the pretensions and style of Nassau’s upper crust, the absurd ritual of leaving calling cards and signing the governor’s book, the formality of their clothing in the hottest weather, their stuffy afternoon dinners, and the love of gossip. Favorite topics were dress, the “wicked coloured” servants and the “inferiority of the coloured race in general.”²⁸ Neville Chamberlain, who was sent by his father to develop a sisal plantation in north Andros, was glad to escape Nassau’s society, which he described as “this weariness.”²⁹ Men of the white elite patronized the old and esteemed Club, where Neville Chamberlain played a game of whist with Chief Justice Yelverton in December 1890. The Club was said to date back to 1742.³⁰

There were charitable societies, and the Temperance Movement resulted in various orders led by the Anglican and Presbyterian churches. The elite also administered several charitable trusts, including the Aaron Dixon Charity, which provided for the education of fatherless children.³¹ Masonic lodges did some charitable work as well. At least two lodges existed for the elite. The more popular of the two, the Royal Victoria Lodge No. 443, established on

23 June 1837, was under the United Grand Lodge of the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of England. It met in the Masonic Temple that had been built in 1885 on Bay Street.³² Also meeting there was the Union Lodge No. 231, which was under the Grand Lodge of Scotland. Some fair-skinned mixed-race men, such as James Carmichael Smith and Elias Dupuch's mulatto sons Joseph and Gilbert Dupuch, were members of the Royal Victoria Lodge. Joseph Dupuch, a successful sponge merchant and building contractor, was architect and builder of the Masonic Temple.³³

Churches played a significant role in the spiritual and secular lives of the white elite. Membership in the Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches afforded prestige and status and also supplied the sons and daughters of the elite with a decent, segregated education not offered by the Board of Education's government schools. Members of one of the three churches, the elite attended Christ Church Cathedral, Trinity Methodist Church, or St. Andrew's Kirk, the latter two being predominantly white. In spite of controversy about ritual, some still considered it particularly prestigious to attend Christ Church Cathedral, considered the "Mother Church" of the Bahamas and usually attended by the governor and his family. In 1892 it had seating for 1,200, which included 400 seats free of pew rent for the poor. It was by paying pew rents that whites commanded better seats in the church. Segregation was rigid. Blacks and those of mixed race were encouraged to worship at St. Mary's Chapel-of-Ease for Christ Church, established in 1868, on Virginia Street in Delancey Town, and St. Agnes in Grant's Town, the black section of Nassau.³⁴

In line with the Victorian attitude, Edward Churton, fourth Bishop of Nassau, advised his clergy in 1888 on the need for "caution, tact, and discernment," warning them that "the two races cannot be treated as precisely on the same footing." He chided them to aim

at promoting a better understanding between white and coloured: Denounce tyranny and contumely on the one hand: cheating, tale bearing, and detraction on the other. Yet do not force the two social elements into closed compact that they are not yet prepared for. Be content to see the White children at your school forming themselves into a group apart from the others. Let the coloured people generally for the present, yield the front sittings in their Church to the descendants of those to whom their fathers were slaves. "Liberty, fraternity, and equality" are not, I think, attained at one stroke by an Emancipation Act, not even in fifty years.³⁵