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the Providence Island
Company and Colony
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Introduction by
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1 PROVENANCE

The Providence Island Company records form the central core of this collection. They consist of two volumes, one containing minutes of Company meetings, the other copies of official letters sent to the Company's representatives on their two islands of Providence and Association in the West Indies, which were copied out by Company Secretary William Jessop when lawsuits aimed at clearing Company debts were pending in the 1650s. The volumes are lodged in the British Public Record Office (CO 124/1 and 2).

Several kinds of documents exist from the time of the colony's foundation in 1630 to the middle of that decade. William Jessop kept a shorthand book of informal letters to Bermuda and Providence Island, said to be written in the system of H Witt, 1630 (British Library Add Ms 10615). The shorthand letterbook was deciphered by K L Perrin in 1968-9 with the aid of funds provided by the History Faculty Board of Oxford University and with the help of Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper (Lord Dacre of Glanton) and Dr Valerie Pearl. The transcription (Add Ms 63854A) is accompanied by Mr Perrin's key to the shorthand (Add Ms 63854B). The British Library also holds the enlarged grant to the Providence Island Company of 1631 (Sloane Ms 973).

Several letters from colonists to one of the investors, Sir Thomas Barrington, are among British Library Egerton Ms 2646 and an extract of a number of letters that may have circulated among the adventurers is in the Barrington Papers in the Essex Record Office (Hatfield Broad Oak Ms D/DBA/02/8). The Manchester Papers, as calendared in the Appendix Part II to the *Eighth Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts*, contain several letters from or concerning the colony (nos. 416, 420, 423, 424). Item 416 is in the Bermuda Archives; microfilm versions of all four are in the British Library. The Bermuda Archives also hold two letters, one from Sir Benjamin Rudyard, the other to him.

In the middle of the 1630s, following a Spanish attack on Providence Island, the Privy Council considered the investors' request for letters of reprisal. Sir John Coke was commissioned to investigate and prepare a report on the state of the island. The Company's request, a draft of Coke's report and the grant of permission to take reprisal are in the Public Record Office (CO 1/8). This permission, along with the previous year's grant of permission to trade in Central America, prompted two reports to Spanish authorities concerning the Company's colonies (British Library Add Mss 36323 ff. 297-300, 13977 ff. 505-12).

The British Library holds letters from Sir Edmund Moundeford to Sir Simonds D'Ewes in the later 1630s urging D'Ewes to take an active part in the project (Harleian Mss 287, 386). A letter from the Earl of Holland to Attorney General Bankes requesting permission for John Pym to stay in London on Company business is in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (Bankes Ms, bundle 65/16).

The Providence Island colony's last days are brought alive in the diary of Captain Nathaniel Butler, the last full governor. He kept his diary and notes of his letters to the Company in the spare first and last pages of his manuscript book on seamanship (British Library Sloane Ms 758). The House of Lords Record Office holds a petition of 22 April 1642 from Robert Robins about his treatment after Butler left. Finally, there is a long report in the Leicestershire Record Office (Finch Mss Box 4982) of the second unsuccessful Spanish attack on Providence Island on 17 June 1640. The Archives of the Indies in Seville hold accounts of the three Spanish attacks on the English colony on Providence Island not included in this collection (Audiencia de Santa Fe, Legajo 223).
The final major group of documents centres on the campaign to clear up the Company's debts from the mid-1640s to the 1660s. These accounts, petitions and depositories are in the Hatfield Broad Oak Manuscripts in the Essex Record Office (D/DBA); House of Lords Manuscripts, 24 July 1645; the Greville of Warwick Castle Manuscripts (CR 1886 Box 457) in the Warwickshire Record Office; and in the Manchester Papers in the Cambridgeshire Record Office, Huntingdon (DDM 28 bundle 7, DDM 32 bundle 9).
2 THE PROVIDENCE ISLAND COMPANY AND COLONY 1630-1641

The Providence Island Company was founded by a small group of 'Protestant Imperialists' including the Earl of Warwick, his cousin Sir Nathaniel Rich, Lord Saye and Sele, Lord Brooke, John Pym, Richard Knightley, Sir Benjamin Rudyard, Sir Edmond Moundeford and Lord Mandeville (later Earl of Manchester). These men saw themselves as carrying on the great tradition of patriotic anti-Spanish activities initiated by the Elizabethans such as Raleigh and Drake. They saw the economic depression of the 1620s, which hit the textile industry of their districts particularly hard, combined with the plague and unrest, as warnings of God's displeasure over England's neutrality in the struggle between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Europe.

In early Stuart England colonisation was the one way still open to build England's claim to great power status and simultaneously to strike at the sources of Spain's might. Though these promoters were sympathetic to the contemporaneous settlement of Massachusetts Bay, they firmly believed that no activity in the cold, barren north could be more than a sideshow. A colony in the tropics could challenge Spain on its own ground; moreover, access to the dyes, fibres and fixatives that came only from hot regions, would revive the English textile industry.

Many of the Providence Island investors were veterans of earlier American enterprises, most notably the Somers Island Colony. They set out to erect a godly commonwealth on their small island off the coast of Nicaragua with the expectation that it would ultimately serve as a jumping off place for much larger settlements on the Mosquito Coast. Despite the fact that the colony attracted many settlers of the solid, 'middling sort' of Puritans, including the former Mayor of Banbury, Henry Halhead, it never formed the kind of closely-knit communities that characterised Massachusetts Bay. Its different environment, goals and location ensured a special development.

Because the colony was in the heart of the Spanish empire, its government was always dominated by military men, with a captain as governor over a council composed of captains of forts and civil leaders. Tension between the civilian and military elites grew steadily during the colony's life; the Puritan ministers exacerbated the strife. Appeals to the Company in London created further confusion as the grandees backing the Company found their strong Puritanism coming into conflict with their hierarchical social and political assumptions.

Economic goals for Providence Island also drew the colony away from classical Puritan models. The settlers were divided among plantations to grow the tropical crops for which the adventurers hoped. Slaves were present from the beginning; the colony quickly acquired a very large slave population, leading to protests from some of the staunch Puritans among the colonists. Not only was the island the source of the first principled attack on slavery in an English colony but it also witnessed the first English slave revolt. From the middle of the decade, runaway slaves in the interior added to the colony's insecurity. Moreover, despite such willingness to exploit African labour, the colony's agricultural yield was always low, poor grade tobacco and cotton were the most reliable products.

Following an unsuccessful Spanish attack in 1635, the Providence Island Company was granted letters of reprisal. From this point forward, attention increasingly concentrated on this sure avenue to wealth, which endangered the family-centred commonwealth which Puritan colonists had hoped for and brought unwelcome Spanish attention. Military concerns came to dominate even more than earlier. It would be wrong, however, to follow A P Newton in asserting that the venture had from the beginning been a rather cynical cover for privateering, which was made possible once the Spanish had been lured to the attack. In fact, careful reading of the documents reveals that the strongly-held Puritan sentiments of the backers continued, that in fact privateering was seen as a solution to the crippling problems that had faced the colony and threatened its very existence. Once its economic survival was
ensured, the settlers could get on with the major goal of building the sort of society English Puritans would want to inhabit.

As late as 1640, when events in England were already beginning to command Providence Island Company members attention, the adventurers continued to try to attract colonists; John Winthrop, governor of Massachusetts Bay, responded angrily to recruitment attempts in New England. It was a large company of settlers from Massachusetts Bay under the command of veteran New Englander Captain John Humphrey, sent to review Providence Island as a godly community, that discovered the Spanish flag flying over the harbour at New Westminster and returned with the news that the colony had ceased to exist.

The Providence Island Company investors played key roles in the early years of the Civil War. John Pym and Lord Brooke died in 1643, many of the others withdrew from public life as they saw England turning in directions they found repugnant. To some extent, their attempt at social engineering in Providence Island had given them a foretaste, had they been able to recognise it, of the results of the upheavals at home they had welcomed so fully. Memories of the company remained in the 1650s in Cromwell's Western Design and in the debts that remained to be settled by company members and their heirs.
3 LIST OF PROVIDENCE ISLAND COMPANY RECORDS

BERMUDA ARCHIVES

HMC Eighth Report Appendix Part II, 416 (Manchester Papers/Rich Papers)
Letter from Captain Philip Bell, Governor of Bermuda to Sir Nathaniel Rich, informing him of the virtues of Providence Island, 28 April 1629

Accession 51, Item 6 Letter from William Rous giving a copy of a letter to him from William Rudyerd, 28 May 1632

Accession 51, Item 5 Copy of a letter, unsigned, from Sir Benjamin Rudyerd in defence of his brother, 1633

BODLEIAN LIBRARY

Bankes Ms bundle 65/16 Letter from the Earl of Holland to Attorney General Bankes on permission for John Pym to remain in London to attend to Providence Island Company business, 1638

BRITISH LIBRARY

Add Ms 10615 Shorthand letterbook of Providence Island Company Secretary, William Jessop, said to be in the system of H Witt, 1630

Add Ms 63854A Transcription of Add Ms 10615, deciphered by K.L Perrin

Add Ms 63854B Mr Perrin's key to William Jessop's shorthand system

Add Ms 13977 Report of the Council of the Indies on the Spanish capture of Tortuga, which belonged to the Providence Island Company, 12 June 1635 (Spanish)

Add Ms 36323 Venezuela Papers. Record of a meeting of the Council of the Indies about Providence Island, 1636 (English)

Egerton Ms 2646 Letters from Providence Island to Sir Thomas Barrington, one of the investors, from:
   f. 52 Samuel Rishworth, 1 December 1633
   f. 58 Hope Sherrard, Minister, 6 January 1633/4
   f. 60 Governor Philip Bell, 20 January 1633/4
   f. 67 Samuel Filbe, 28 August 1634
   f. 76 Hope Sherrard, 25 February 1634/5

Harleian Ms 287 f. 265 Sir Edmund Moundeford to Sir Simonds D'Ewes concerning Providence Island, 1637

Harleian Ms. 386 ff. 56, 57 Two letters from Sir Edmund Moundeford to Sir Simonds D'Ewes urging him to join the Providence Island Company

Sloane Ms 758 Diary of Captain Nathaniel Butler, last Governor of Providence Island

Sloane Ms 973 Enlarged grant to the Providence Island Company, 1631
CAMBRIDGESHIRE COUNTY RECORD OFFICE

DDM 28 bundle 7/15, 16, 18-20 Letters about efforts to clear up the Company's debts, 1652

DDM 32 bundle 9/13 Petition from former colonist, Samuel Young, to Lord Mandeville

ESSEX RECORD OFFICE

D/DBA/02/1 21 January 1630/1, Sir Thomas Barrington's admission to the Providence Island Company

D/DBA/02/2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20 Receipts for money paid to the Providence Island Company by Sir Thomas Barrington. Signed by John Pym

D/DBA/02/24 Similar receipt signed by Company Secretary, William Jessop

D/DBA/02/5, 6, 10 Indentures of Providence Island colonists, January 1631/2

D/DBA/02/8 Extracts of letters from 'ye Isle of Providence' dated about 1 July 1631

D/DBA/02/17 Lady Judith Barrington, note of monies spent on the Providence Island venture, c 1633

D/DBA/02/21 Order of Providence Island Company General Court, 20 March 1637/8

D/DBA/02/23, 25 Records of Indebtedness of Company members

D/DBA/02/26 Deposition of William Jessop on Providence Island Company accounts, 15 May 1644

D/DBA/02/30 Draft of Sir John Barrington's petition for protection from entire Providence Island Company debt, dated 1660 on back

D/DBA/02/28 House of Lords' answer to D/DBA/02/30

HOUSE OF LORDS RECORD OFFICE

Ms 1642 no. 4 Petition of Robert Robins about his treatment on Providence Island and aboard ship, 22 April 1642

Ms 1645 no. 7 Petition of Sir John Barrington against his being held solely responsible for the entire Providence Island Company debt. All other investors or their heirs were members of the Long Parliament and immune from prosecution.

LEICESTERSHIRE RECORD OFFICE

Finch Ms (DG 7) Box 4982 Report of 17 June 1640 of the Spanish attack on Providence Island
PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE (KEW)

CO 124/1, CO 124/2 Records and letter book of the Providence Island Company

CO 1/8/81 Earl of Holland's report on the Spanish attack on Providence Island, 21 December 1635

CO 1/8/83 Sir John Coke's draft report on the condition of Providence Island, December 1635

CO 1/8/86 Grant of letters of reprisal to the Providence Island Company, 27 December 1635

PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE (CHANCERY LANE)

C 66/2691 Entry 2 Patent Roll, 11 Charles I, Part 8: charter to the Earls of Warwick and Holland and others under the style of the 'Governor and Company of Adventurers of the City of London for a Trade upon the Coasts and Islands of divers parts of America

SO 3/11 Signet Office Docquet Book 1634-1638: grant of patent for trade in Central America to the Providence Island Company, March 1634/5

SP 94/40 Richard Fanshawe to Mr Secretary Coke on prospects for release of Captain William Rous, taken by the Spanish in a Providence Island privateer from Madrid, 12 June 1638

WARWICKSHIRE RECORD OFFICE

CR 1866 Box 457 bundle marked Providence Island. These documents are Providence Island bonds, some with notations from 1652 on the manner in which they are to be cleared, some from the 1660s
4 CONTENTS OF THE FILM

Reel 1
Bermuda Archives  HMC 416
Public Record Office CO 124/1, CO 124/2
British Library Sloane Ms 973
British Library Add Ms 10615
British Library Add Ms 36854A
British Library Add Ms 36854B

Reel 2
Essex Record Office  D/DBA/02/1-4, 7, 9, 11-16, 18-20, 24, 5, 6, 10, 8, 17
British Library Egerton Ms 2646 ff. 52, 58, 60, 67, 76
Bermuda Archives  Accession 51, Item 6 and 5
Public Record Office CO 1/8/81, 83, 86
Public Record Office C 66/2691 Entry 2
Public Record Office (Chancery Lane) Signet Office Docquet Book SO 3/11
British Library Add Ms 36323 ff. 297-300
British Library Add Ms 13977 ff. 505-12
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British Library Harleian Ms 386 ff. 56, 57
British Library Harleian Ms 287 f. 265
Public Record Office (Chancery Lane) State Papers, Spain, SP 94/40 f. 85
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Leicestershire Record Office  Finch Ms (DG 7) Box 4982
House of Lords Record Office  Ms 1642, no. 4
House of Lords Record Office  Ms 1645, no. 7
Essex Record Office D/DBA/02/21, 23, 25, 26, 28, 30
Cambridgeshire Record Office  DDM 28 bundle 7/15, 16, 18-20
Cambridgeshire Record Office  DDM 32 bundle 9/13
Warwickshire Record Office  CR 1886 Box 457
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