



Trinidad's

# Raj

BY GERARD A. BESSON

*Land of Hope and Glory,  
Mother of the Free,  
How shall we extol thee,  
Who art born of thee?  
Wider still and wider  
Shall thy bounds be set;  
God who made thee mighty,  
Make thee mightier yet.*



Queen (Alexandrina) Victoria  
(24 May 1819 – 22 January 1901)

Once upon a time, not too long ago, Trinidad and Tobago and all the states of the Commonwealth of Nations who are to be represented by their Heads of Government in Port of Spain in November 2009, were a part of what has been called the “last empire”.

John Wilson, writing for Blackwood Magazine, remarked in 1817 that “the sun never sets upon the Union Jack”. For, wherever the dawn was breaking, “The Colours”, Great Britain’s colours, would be rising, snapping in the wind: in India, Burma or Hong Kong, in the sultry heat of Aden, overlooking the Red Sea, above the Rock of Gibraltar, over Africa, against the blue Caribbean skies, in the cold gray north of Canada, or “Down Under,” in Australia and New Zealand. The world maps of the day were dotted and coloured red all over, signifying colonies, protectorates, dominions and territories. All this belonged to “us”. We, in Trinidad and Tobago, for 165 years, from 1797 to 1962, were a part of this global phenomenon, the British Empire, which by 1910 comprised approximately 412 million people, all administered by an island nation off the European coast.

Trinidad and Tobago, formerly possessions of the Spanish Crown, became a part of this great, worldwide enterprise as elements of an overall peace arrangement, signed in Amiens in 1802. Tobago, experiencing a different historical process, became British in 1814.

It was not to last, this last empire, for as the 20th century achieved its zenith, the Empire’s constituents, with an ever growing sense of urgency, would become engaged in the process of maturing into independent states. From this striving for independence, while seeking to retain the strength that only unity can create, a Commonwealth of Nations would evolve. This flowering of nations, across the face of the earth, sowed the seeds of progress and hope for a future that was forged from a profound love of liberty. With faith in their destiny, the former glory of the old Empire was gradually eclipsed by the hopes and nationalistic ideals of a new generation.

The closing years of the British Empire indicated one of those epochs in history when a narrative, an interpretation of history, one that had endured for well over two centuries, would give way to a fresh view of the future. This new vision would prompt those who rose to the challenge of leadership



in the former colonies to pronounce, in a new language, the words that defined the end of the colonial epoch. They would inspire their people to engage in a process of national self-creation and of identity formation that would involve 'a recasting of history to produce a usable past' as Howard Johnson would say of Jamaica.

## The Age of Deference

In 1884, British Liberal statesman and Prime Minister Lord Rosebery, had described the evolving British Empire as a "Commonwealth of Nations", and in so doing prefigured things to come.

Initially, the British Empire had been essentially a New World creation, carved out of the wilderness of North America's eastern seaboard. It had been won from Spain in the Caribbean by the privateers in the 16th century, men like Sir Francis Drake, and those of the 17th like Sir Henry Morgan. These were followed in the 18th by naval and military men like Lieutenant General Sir Ralph Abercromby and Admiral Sir Henry Harvey. Britain would lose her American colonies by the 1780s, but would gain Canada.

Parallel to these developments in the west, Clive of India had laid the foundation for the East India Trading Company, the precursor to the "British Raj", and in the wake of the battle of Trafalgar in 1805 and the narrow victory over the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte at Waterloo in 1815, Britannia would rule the oceans of the world. "Once again, the oceans were free ... unoccupied land, habitable land still existed in which white men could dwell in peace and liberty and could perhaps better themselves," declared Winston Churchill to the British people, expressing the paternally condescending sentiments typical of the time.

The mindset of victorious Great Britain after some 20 years of war was reflected in words like "lands were out there for the taking." This was one of the concepts that underpinned the empire. That these lands were already inhabited by the original owners at that point in time must have seemed incidental to these would-be Empire builders. Historian William Manchester writes: "Social mobility, as we understand it today, was not only unpursued by the vast majority, it had never existed." As



*The Government House at St Ann's. The foundation stone was laid in 1876. It was designed by Mr Ferguson on the Indian Colonial – British Raj – model and was built of local limestone*



*Sir Courtenay Knollys, K.C.M.G. Colonial Secretary and Acting Governor of Trinidad in the 1890s*

a consequence, it had to be pursued abroad, and was achieved by the great imperialists, men like Sir Cecil Rhodes (who gave "us" Rhodesia), Chinese Gordon, Clive of India, Lawrence of Arabia and Gordon of Khartoum. They had all donned the "widow's uniform" and ventured out to conquer the known and the unknown world for Queen Empress. She was the widow, and they were "the widow's sons", to use Kipling's turn of phrase. It was the high noon of the age of deference.

*The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate  
God made them high and lowly  
And orders their estate*

sang the high-born and the humble on many a Sunday morning in churches and chapels all over the Empire. The ideology of Empire was absorbed by colonials, and redefined by the imperialists as the Empire grew and changed. Queen Victoria, widowed, stern, removed, embodied an ideal which was institutionalised, packaged and exported to the colonies, where it was consumed at events such as Empire Day. With this came stirring hymns, rousing marches and







*The Princes Building once stood on the spot where the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting is being held in Port of Spain in November 2009. It was built in 1861 in anticipation of the visit of Prince Alfred, Queen Victoria's second son*

most importantly the cult of militarism: "Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves", its most emotionally moving line, "Britons never never shall be slaves". By osmosis, subjects, some of them former slaves themselves, now Britons at least by adoption, were guaranteed freedom. This generated in the minds of the subject people a sort of ambiguity, a kind of schizophrenic sense of oneself, and, yet, another self.

The subjects of the Empire identified with the victories of

its heroes, men like Lord Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the world-wide Boy Scout movement, who visited Trinidad in 1923, and Horatio Herbert Kitchener, British Field Marshal and statesman. Both have streets named in their honour in Port of Spain. These empire builders were as famous as the cinema personalities of today – with the subtle difference that their events were real, whereas the pseudo-events of today's celebrities are fictitious. Those generals were real-life heroes. Their battles and their victories, their honours and their deaths were written about in the newspapers and sometimes marked with solemn ceremony.

People in Trinidad were deeply moved by the events in the Sudan at the start of the 20th century. Field Marshal Kitchener's role in this conflict, for example, prompted Trinidadian calypso singer Aldwyn Roberts to call himself "Lord Kitchener".

Street names like Mafeking Trace in Mayaro on the east coast and Lucknow Street in St James, a suburb to the west of Port of Spain, marked places where British arms had been vanquished and subsequently "relieved" and redeemed. These neighbourhoods were dedicated through their street names to the glory of the British Raj, Delhi and Lucknow, Benares, Bengal, and Calcutta Streets, were names to conjure up William Blake's "Tiger Tiger burning bright."

Trinidad and later Tobago were Crown Colonies, as were

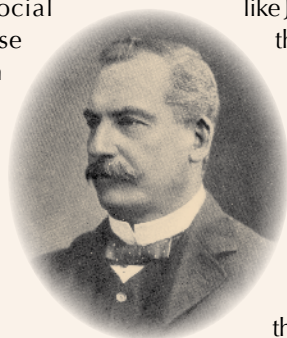
*A Carnival band playing Trinidad's traditional "sailor mas(querade)" is coming up Frederick Street in the 1920s. At left Memorial Park with its Cenotaph, and at right the Victoria Institute (now National Museum) and the Princes Building (now the Performing Arts Centre, where the CHOGM 2009 is held)*



many across Britain's wide empire. Governors were absolute rulers, responsible only to the Colonial Office in London. They acted at times with the advice of an Executive Council, which consisted of the Colonial Secretary, the Attorney General, the Treasurer and a handful of others, appointed by the governors. C.L.R. James, Trinidadian teacher, author and social activist, remarked in 1932: "In other words, these colonies are governed by an autocratic alien with three or four other aliens and one or two local men, chosen by himself as representatives of the people. To any unbiased ear, it sounds bad, and it is as bad as it sounds."

### No consensus on the nature of Hope and Glory

It must be said that there was never any clear agreement on the whole subject of colonialism, not even in the Land of Hope and Glory itself. Perhaps it contained too many contradictions. Some economists felt that colonies were "a vicious excuse to exercise monopoly, and as such contrary to the general economic interest," as Paul Johnson recounts in *Modern Times*. Lord Shelburne outlined in the latter half of the 18th century a policy that "England prefers trade without domination where possible, but accepts trade with domination when necessary." Some held the view that the object of colonisation was to provide living space for overcrowded European



*Sir George Ruthven Le Hunte, G.C.M.G.  
Governor of Trinidad and Tobago  
1909 - 1916*

populations. Others held that without it, the huge "unwashed" (that is, the unemployed and poor) would rise up and destroy the social order of the day. Sir Cecil Rhodes said in the latter half of the 19th century "The Empire is a bread and butter question: if you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists." Protectionists

like Joseph Chamberlain maintained that the colonies were there to provide safe markets for exports, "a return to pre-industrial mercantilism." Robert Torrens in 1835 was the first who put forward the view that colonies should be seen primarily as a place to invest capital. The notion was taken up by John Stuart Mill who held that colonisation was the best affair of business in which an old and wealthy country could engage.

Others expressed the view in support of colonisation that quite apart from the financial interest, there was the need to engage in social engineering. For them, the export of the poor, the criminal and the working class to the colonies was a 'moral mandate' to make the financial resources of Europe available to the whole world.

The idea of exporting capital was seen, however, as highly suspect by some. They argued that the only people who gained from the creation of empires were the finance-capitalists. While the army covered itself in glory and the administrators lived a life beyond their wildest dreams, the people of the colonies suffered hellish deprivations in terms of self-fulfillment. All the while, their natural







*Militarism, pomp and ceremony were very much a part of the self-image of the British Empire and made its might apparent to the people in the colonies*

resources were depleted and basically stolen from them. This was perceived as the conspiracy of imperialism, which, because of the natural tendency of the Great Powers of Europe to be envious of each other, led directly to the First World War.

## The Formation of a People

In 1797, the year of the British conquest of Spanish-held Trinidad, its population comprised some 1,093 Europeans – mostly French – and 2,925 French-speaking free blacks and persons of colour. They had arrived, together with African slaves, after 1783 under the terms of a Spanish-sponsored Cedula of Population. They, together, would lay the foundation for an agricultural economy. In the transaction that had shaped the terms of surrender, the island's Spanish laws were left intact. We were off to a unique start, a British colony with Spanish laws and a French-speaking population.

Trinidad would be described as an “experimental colony” in the first decades



of the 19th century by British Prime Minister George Canning, and experienced the arrival of East Indian, Chinese and Portuguese indentured labourers in the years that followed the emancipation of the African slaves in 1838. Later, Corsicans, Irish, Germans and Americans joined us to work in the colony's prosperously growing plantation economy, which by that time would be based on the export of sugar and a highly-regarded, top-quality cocoa. Scottish merchant adventurers, involved in all sorts of trading, arrived. Some came as engineers to the cane factories, some to establish the railway, to build bridges, and later to develop the oilfields. These would over time add another economy to Trinidad and Tobago's prosperity.

English bankers, Irish soldiery, British administrators, policemen, teachers, lawyers and clergymen came out to run the Raj part of Trinidad's Raj. Of course, many of these men were, or grew to be, able administrators. Over time were to arrive, and be made welcome, elements of the old Ottoman Empire, who hailed from Syria and the Lebanon, and, before the last war, several Jewish families came from Europe. All the while people from the other islands of the Caribbean came, seeking a better life – as they do to this day. All this variety was kept firmly in its place by the absolute pressure of colonial rule.

Trinidad and Tobago, the southernmost island-nation in the Caribbean chain, with this diversity of people, and with its cycles of festivals, became highly cosmopolitan, reflective not only of the “Commonwealth of Nations” that was yet to come into existence, but indeed, of the wider world itself.

## Life in the Tropics

The Englishmen, both in high and in humble positions, who were stationed in the colonies,

were mostly birds of passage and did not seek the opportunity for social intercourse with the “subject people”. The heads of the various government departments, forerunners to our present ministerial systems, mixed mostly with one another, in that most English of institutions: the Club. All over the Empire, the Club was a vital part of the life of the expatriate. Getting together for games and exercise and talk was really a very important part of their lives. It was the social centre of the civil and military establishment in the colonies. In Trinidad, there were several of these Clubs, ranging from the Clydesdale, an enclave of Scottish conviviality, its membership mostly merchants and clerks, whose distinction was the introduction of football to the colony, on through to the more exclusive St Clair Club, Savannah Club and Union Club, whose membership contained the top echelons of the expatriate community. As C.L.R. James complained: “These social gatherings, with the more wealthy element of the white creoles, whose interests lie with the maintenance of all the authority and privileges of the officials, against the political advancement of the local people.”

In Trinidad and Tobago and elsewhere in the Caribbean, colonial rule was ensured by the presence of the ubiquitous gunboat. The West India Squadron, together with the North American Squadron, represented Great Britain’s naval might in the Western hemisphere. The squadrons’ annual voyage from Halifax to Bermuda, then on through the entire Caribbean chain of islands, stopping at every port, almost always just beyond the horizon, preserved a sense of security to the governors, administrators, planters and merchants and indeed the entire community of these islands. In the event of local trouble, which occurred on all the islands fairly regularly, a telegraphed message would bring a British battleship and the Royal Marines, called Bluejackets, to the local harbour and the island’s capital in a day or two or even sooner. This was a comforting thought to the middle classes, but gave pause to those intent on creating disturbances.

“We represent large interest,” said an



*The Union Club until very recently stood on Marine Square, now Independence Square, in Port of Spain*

attorney-general, and everyone knew what he meant. Those of us who are old enough remember them well: wearing white Pith helmets, khaki shorts, tall socks, the inevitable pipe stuck in them – “steel true and blade straight”, as they thought of themselves, toasting in the clubs “to rose-lipped girls and light-foot lads” and talking about ‘home’.

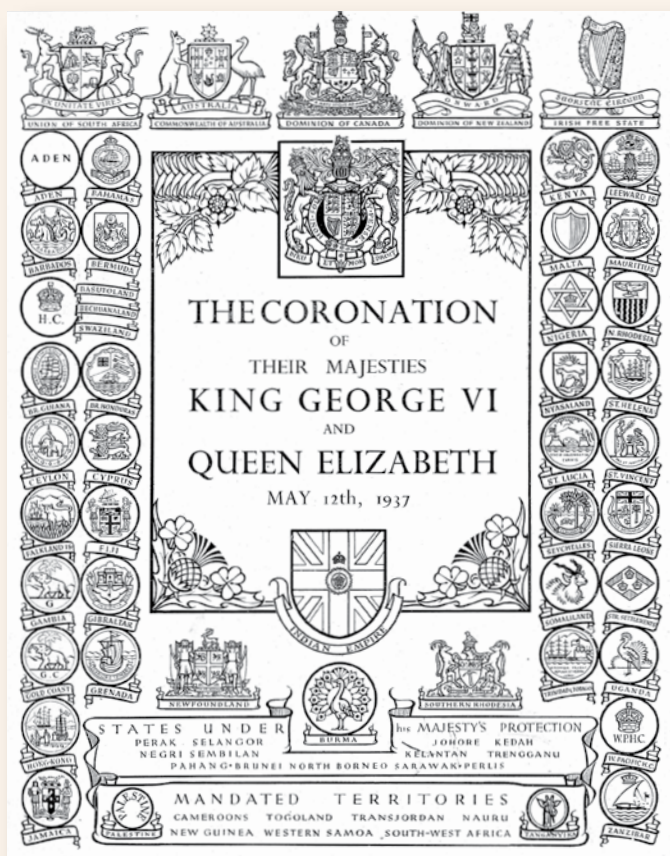
## The Winds of Change

Out of this hubris would emerge modern Trinidad and Tobago. Possessed of a nascent political awareness, it produced a movement, probably the originator of all political movements that this country would see. It was called the Reform Movement. It did not seek independence – how could it? It merely sought home rule, a greater representation of the people, and another abolition, this time the abolition of Crown Colony rule. The political administrators of the Empire sincerely felt that they could not allow for such a change in Trinidad and Tobago. They did, however, make small concessions to local opinion expressed by men of property and education.

Compared to other empires of the day, the British Empire was by far the most liberal. The Empire was an institution that, despite its faults, did bestow on its subject peoples







Above: This cover of the Coronation issue of 1937 shows a collection of the coats of arms of the various colonies of the British Empire.

Below: Sir Murchison Fletcher Governor of Trinidad and Tobago from 1936 to 1937 and Lady Fletcher.

In Trinidad and Tobago, as in all other colonies, territories and dominions, the affairs of the Empire often superseded local events in the newspapers



fundamental ideas concerning the responsibilities and duties of a civil society and an understanding of democratic institutions, the workings of the rule of law, the necessity of an independent judiciary and a free press, of a good colonial education, notions of respectability (not to be confused with morality), and in the end, independence.

The advent of a post-colonial world commenced in the decades following the end of the Second World War. This was signalled, to use the words of the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, by the “winds of change”, an idea which he expressed addressing the Parliament of South Africa in 1960 in Cape Town. His words indicated that most of the British possessions were to become independent nations in the 1960s.

One may argue that the significant post-colonial narrative that would influence academics and thinkers in a great many former British colonies was framed by the work of the distinguished Trinidadian scholar who was Trinidad and Tobago’s first Prime Minister, Dr the Right Honourable Eric Eustace Williams. By writing and publishing his doctoral thesis “Capitalism and Slavery”, he contributed significantly to the deconstruction of the British imperial mythology concerning its right to rule.

Dr Williams, in deciding to “let his bucket down” here, meaning that he would devote the rest of his life to serve the interest of his island home, would lead Trinidad and Tobago to independence in 1962 and eventually to republican status within the Commonwealth in 1976. His approach to politicising the population was original. He declared war – not upon the agents of colonialism, but on ignorance. He created a virtual institution of learning and christened it “the University of Woodford Square”. This in itself was an ironic choice, as Sir Ralph Woodford, after whom the square in Port of Spain was named, was Trinidad and Tobago’s first British civil governor. There Williams taught and enraptured the population with his lectures on the history of their colonial past, the nature of British colonial rule and the extent to which they had been made the victims of a flawed historical narrative. Here, in a professorial style, he outlined a future in which all would be called upon to construct the new nation of Trinidad and Tobago. He told the nation in his inaugural address

on the eve of independence, the 30th August 1962, marking the end of the Trinidad Raj:

“There can be no Mother India for those whose ancestors came from India . . . there can be no Mother Africa for those of African origin . . . there can be no Mother England and no dual loyalties; . . . there can be no Mother China even one could agree as to which China is the Mother; and there can be no Mother Syria or no Mother Lebanon. A nation, like an individual, can have only one Mother. The only Mother we recognise is Mother Trinidad and Tobago, and a Mother cannot discriminate between her children.”



*Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness Prince Philip with Governor General of Trinidad and Tobago Sir Solomon and Lady Hochoy and Prime Minister Dr Eric Williams*



*Her Majesty the Queen and Prince Philip escorted into the House of Parliament by the Speaker of the House of Parliament and the President of the Senate*



*Her Majesty the Queen, His Royal Highness Prince Philip and Col. Geoff Serrette, Commander in Chief of the Trinidad and Tobago Regiment*



*Dr. The Right Honourable Eric Williams, the Prime Minister, and Miss Erica Williams*



*Her Majesty the Queen meets students of the University of the West Indies*



*Her Majesty the Queen delivers the throne speech at the House of Representatives*



*Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh*