SLAVERY

THE HIGH PRICE OF SUGAR

To satisfy Europe's fondness for sweets, West Indian planters turned to Africa for plantation labor

by SUSAN MILLER

Right from the start, Columbus had a plan to establish a sugar industry on Hispaniola much like the ones back home on the Canary and Madeira islands. So on his second voyage to the New World, he brought along several stalks of sugar cane. The Spanish hidalgos couldn't be bothered with the broiling, backbreaking task of growing and making the sweetener, so they forced the locals to do it for them. When the Indians started dropping from disease, the Spaniards turned to Africa. By the mid-16th century a nascent sugar industry completely dependent on black slave labor had taken hold in the Spanish Caribbean. The dramatic change on Hispaniola prompted a Spanish historian to write: "There are so many Negroes in this island, as a result of the sugar factories, that the land seems an effigy or an image of Ethiopia itself." Thus began a relationship between sugar production and African slavery that was to dominate Caribbean life for nearly four centuries.

Coins and clay pipes were among the slaves' belongings

West Indian women on their way to market
This relationship had already existed in the Old World for hundreds of years. The first reference to sugar dates back to 350 B.C., with the report that people in India were eating rice pudding with milk and sugar and sipping drinks flavored with the sweetener. A little later, in 327 B.C., Alexander the Great's general, Nearchus, sailing from the mouth of the Indus River to the Euphrates, asserted that "a reed in India brings forth honey without the help of bees, from which an intoxicating drink is made though the plant bears no fruit." But not until about A.D. 500 is there unmistakable written evidence of sugar making; the technology didn’t spread westward until the Moorish invasion of Europe in the seventh century. Sugar, according to anthropologist Sidney Mintz, followed the Koran.

The first Africans were enslaved soon afterward. Mintz reports that a slave revolt involving thousands of East African laborers took place in the Tigris-Euphrates delta as early as the mid-ninth century. Slavery grew more important as European crusaders seized the sugar plantations of the eastern Mediterranean from their Arab predecessors. By the 15th century, African slaves supplied the labor for the Spanish and Portuguese plantations on the Atlantic islands off the coast of Africa. To the Spanish way of thinking, then, African slaves were the logical solution to the labor shortages in the New World.

While Spaniards in the Caribbean were the first to produce and export sugar, their pioneering efforts were soon outstripped by developments on the American mainland. Sugar cane prospered in the Spanish territories of Mexico, Paraguay and Peru. By 1526, the Portuguese had begun shipping sugar from Brazil to Lisbon in commercial quantities.

By the end of the 17th century, the British had also established stakes in the Caribbean, and slavery became an integral part of their newly settled colonies almost from the start. Dutch traders, who had a foothold in Brazil, first introduced sugar making to English colonists on the island of Barbados in the 1630s. From humble beginnings, the British sugar industry spread north to the Leeward Islands, where it soon wrought a social, economic and political transformation so sweeping and rapid that historians have called it the Sugar Revolution. "England fought the most, conquered the most colonies, imported the most slaves and went furthest and fastest in creating a plantation system," writes Mintz in "Sweetness and Power." In 1655, when Britain conquered Jamaica—an island nearly 30 times the size of Barbados—she came to dominate the north European sugar trade.

The sugar industry was a messy business. Planters, clearing huge tracts of forested land, devastated the environment. In 1969, trees covered more than two thirds of the British colony of Antigua. By 1751, planters had stripped every acre suitable for cultivation. Antiguan John Luffman, writing in 1786, observed that even the largest hills were "clothed with the luxuriant verdure of the sugar cane to their very summits." The rapid deforestation only heightened the region’s propensity for drought and erosion.

It was also extremely lucrative. In the 18th century, Antigua rivaled Barbados as one of the leading producers in the Caribbean, although neither could compete with Jamaica or French Saint Domingue (Haiti). "Barbados, in one period, and Antigua, in another, were producing more wealth than the entire North American continent," says Conrad Goodwin, an anthropologist who (along with geographer Lydia Pulsipher) has spent more than
a decade excavating and studying sugar plantations on Antigua and the neighboring island of Montserrat.

The production of sugar—from hoiling, planting and harvesting to crushing, boiling and curing—depended on a large work force. To meet the demand for labor, Antiguan planters imported tens of thousands of slaves from Africa. In 1678 there were 2,308 whites and 2,172 blacks on the island. By the mid-18th century, Antigua’s population had grown to nearly 40,000, and blacks outnumbered whites 10 to 1. David Barry Gaspar, an historian at Duke University, speculates that the ratio of blacks to whites would have been even higher if thousands hadn’t committed suicide or died as the result of accidents, disease, poor diet, hard labor and mistreatment at the hands of their masters. “Because of the general oppressive environment of slavery, the slave population was not self-reproducing,” says Gaspar. Their ranks had to be constantly replenished with imports from Africa.

A slave’s life was grim beyond our capacity to imagine and sometimes beyond their capacity to endure. The workday was endless, and beatings were common for the slightest infraction. Mary Prince, a slave who lived on a number of different Caribbean islands in the early 19th century, describes her treatment by one particularly cruel owner: “To strip me naked—to hang me up by the wrists and lay my flesh open with the cow skin, was an ordinary punishment for even a slight offence.”

The conditions on plantations drove some slaves to suicide and infanticide. Others fought back with insubordination, malingering and feigned illnesses. Running away was virtually impossible since by the mid-18th century the forests had been cleared and most of the smaller islands afforded no place to hide. But, as recent scholars have begun to see, the slaves were often resourceful in adapting to their plight. “I’m not saying that slavery wasn’t bad, because it was,” says Pulsipher. “But slaves were not just victims. We should give them credit for being able to seize a bad situation and make the best of it.”

On most plantations slaves managed to carve out a degree of autonomy by insisting on certain rights, such as a weekly day off and the right to sell, at Sunday market, food they had grown in their own gardens. “One of the forms of both accommodation and resistance, especially on Montserrat, was through these slave gardens up in the hills,” says Goodwin. “Because they could escape white eyes, these gardens had connotations of freedom and self-worth. But the gardens were also advantageous to slave owners because they relieved them of some of the responsibility of supplying food to slaves.”

Sunday, market day, had little religious significance for slaves who, at least in the early years, didn’t attend church. Because slavery did not square with their religious teachings, Anglican planters had little interest in converting their labor force. It was not until the late 1700s, when the Moravians and Methodists arrived and opened their doors to slaves, that Sunday became important as a day of worship. In the meantime, they quietly practiced the religious traditions they had brought over from Africa. Islam had some influence, but it’s not known how much.

But even after the introduction of Christianity, Sunday remained one of the few days that slaves found free time to enjoy themselves. John Luffman observed this description of a musical afternoon: “Negroes are very fond of the discordant notes of the banjar and the hollow sound of the toombah. . . . The banjar is the invention of and was brought here by the African Negroes, who among the principal expert in the performance which are principally their own country tunes. To this music, I have seen 100 or more dancing at a time.”

Slaves seized an opportunity that was given them by the western European calendar and, quickly and entrepreneurially, started the markets. “Slaves used this time to socialize, reaffirm cultural links, meet their mates and sell whatever it was they had for sale: the baskets they’d woven, the food they’d made or the vegetables they’d grown. It was a time to improve their economic status, in small but significant ways.”

In excavating Galways Plantation on Montserrat, Pulsipher and Goodwin unearthed an unusual abundance of artifacts from the plantation’s slave village, including imported porcelain dishes, clay pipes, buttons, clothing fasteners, beads and coins. These people were into a material culture,” says Pulsipher. “Our theory is that their wealth was a result of their gardens up on the hillsides.” Judging by the artifacts, Goodwin suspects slaves on Galways Plantation possessed maybe twice the material wealth of slaves on typical plantations in the southern United States.

In other parts of the Caribbean, however, slaves were not so fortunate. On Antigua, slaves had trouble finding space to plant their gardens because nearly every acre was in cane. Despite laws ordering slave owners to provide plantations with provision grounds, many wouldn’t spare the land to ensure that slaves were adequately fed.

Throughout the Caribbean, sugar plantations were a curious blend of farming and factory work because so much of the industrial processing of the sugar was carried out on the spot. Mintz has
dubbed the plantations "precocious cases of industrialization," and even the planters themselves recognized their industrial elements. In "An Essay Upon Plantership," Samuel Martin, an Antiguan planter writing in 1773, described the plantation as a machine with many moving parts: if one part broke, the machine broke. "Even that early, labor was very important, filling many cogs in the machine," says Goodwin.

The "sugar" cycle began in August or September, when the laborers prepared the fields for planting. Slaves, wielding hoes under a mercilessly hot sun, dug holes about five or six inches deep and about five feet square, into which they placed cane cuttings, covered them with a layer of mold and prayed for rain. The slaves tended the new cane shoots as they grew; the crop was harvested, one field at a time, 15 months later.

When it came to the harvest, timing was everything. As soon as the sugar cane was ripe it had to be cut and ground, often within 24 hours to keep it from spoiling. Black overseers, called drivers, would stand behind a line of slaves, crack their whips and give the order to start cutting. From the break of dawn until after dusk, the slaves toiled in the hot, sticky fields—cutting the cane, gathering up the stalks, stripping off the leaves and loading the 100-pound bundles onto ox carts bound for the mill. The pace was so frenzied that pregnant women were sometimes obliged to give birth in the field and then continue working.

For the slaves who fed the mill, the work was less physically demanding but posed different dangers. The feeders, as they were called, were liable, especially when tired, to get their fingers caught between the vertical rollers that crushed the cane. A watchman stood ready with a hatchet to sever an arm before it could be drawn into the machine. As terrible as this must have been, the alternative was worse. The rollers couldn't be stopped by flipping a switch. "If the limb wasn't chopped off, the slave would be crushed to death," says Goodwin.

The boilermen had a less exciting but hotter and heavier task. Juice from the sugar cane would enter the boiling house by a pipe that ran from the mill, and workers would siphon it into a great copper basin. After several hours of boiling and skimming, the slaves would ladle the steamy liquid into a number of successively smalleroppers until it was ready to crystallize. The sugar was then cooled, packed into barrels and rolled into the curing room. Holes were drilled in the bottoms of the barrels, allowing the molasses to drain into separate containers.

Laboring in temperatures above 100 degrees, the boilermen often worked through the night, and the darkness increased the likelihood of serious burns from the scalding, sugary liquid. But because their job required a high degree of knowledge and skill, the boilermen were among the most valued slaves on the plantation.

Slaves used the molasses and skimmings from the boiling house to make rum. Water, molasses, yeast and lees were combined in a fermenting cistern and left for a week to 10 days. The fermented liquid was distilled into rum and decanted in wooden barrels. The rum, as well as sugar and molasses, was stored in a warehouse until a ship arrived to carry it either to Europe or to one of the North American colonies.

In the 17th century, there emerged two so-called triangles of trade. The first and most famous of these linked Europe to Africa and the West Indies. European goods, such as trinkets, arms, gunpowder and gin, were exchanged for slaves in West Africa. The slaves were shipped to the West Indies and sold for sugar, coffee, indigo and other tropical products, which were then sent to the European mother country. The second triangle wasn't vital to world trade until the mid-18th century. In this scenario, New England merchants shipped rum to Africa, exchanged the rum for slaves and sailed to the West Indies, where they sold the slaves, bought molasses for rum-making and returned home.

As several scholars have pointed out, trade was not limited to these two triangles; more often than not, it moved in several directions. "Some of the trade did actually flow in legal channels as it was supposed to do, within a single imperial system," notes Philip D. Curtin, author of "The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex." "Much of it flowed outside those channels."

The sugar industry—so prosperous for nearly two centuries—had started to decline by the mid-19th century. Several factors contributed to its downward spiral: emancipation of the slaves, falling sugar prices and the development of alternative sweeteners. Still, on some islands—Puerto Rico, Barbados, Cuba and the Dominican Republic—sugar remains the main export today. On Antigua, the only reminders of the sugar heyday are the ruins of countless plantations, the Cavalier rum factory (which must import its molasses from the Dominican Republic) and a population that traces its roots to Africa. On Antigua, as with so many islands, one monoculture has simply been exchanged for another: tourism is now virtually the only industry.

Despite the changes wrought by 500 years of contact with the Old World, the people of the West Indies have managed to build a vibrant culture, mixing European elements with those of Africa and the Americas. In the British West Indies, for example, cricket has long been the most popular sport. Before a recent match between Montserrat and Antigua, the Montserratian team, which hadn't won a game all season, performed an old African rite to increase its chances: rising at dawn, they gathered on the playing field and started dancing ... to drive away the evil spirits.