
FATHER ANTOINE BIET'S VISIT
TO BARBADOS
IN 1654

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by

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I

In 1651, a French company obtained its government's permission to re-establish a colony in Cayenne. Between 500-600 persons were recruited for this venture, and these were joined by a group of French priests. Among this group was Father Biet, about 31 years old, who had decided to leave his church near Paris in order to meet the missionary challenges of the New World. The expedition left Le Havre in July, 1652. After stopping for provisions at Madeira, it arrived in Cayenne almost three months later, establishing itself at the site of a former French settlement, defunct some ten or eleven years before. Within the first year of its new life, personal and political dissensions erupted in the community, disturbing its cohesion and affecting its ability to feed and defend itself effectively. Indian attacks, problems of basic sustenance, plus a particularly decimating epidemic finally forced the remaining colonists to leave Cayenne. Making their way to the English colony at Surinam, they found an English captain whose ship was being loaded with timber for Barbados. He agreed to take them, at the price of 150 pounds of sugar per head, to the island.

The French party of over sixty persons left Surinam on the 16th or 17th of January and arrived at Barbados on February 2, 1654. Biet left the island for Martinique close to three months later. From there he went on to Guadeloupe, ultimately returning to France in August 1654, a little over two years after his voyage had begun.

Supplementing his memory with notes he had made, Biet described his adventures and the places he had visited. The book, published some ten years after his return to Paris, is largely an account of the expedition's trip from France and the colony's experiences in Cayenne, including ethnographic and linguistic descriptions of some of the Amerindian population. But Biet also records the group's adventures in Surinam and Barbados, and his own experiences in Martinique and Guadeloupe.

I accidentally came across Biet's account while looking for materials relating to Barbados' early social history in the National Library of Ireland.² In the book's lengthy and, in many ways, typical 17th century title page there is absolutely no indication that its contents have any bearing on Barbados. Fortunately, some un-

known cataloguer at the National Library of Ireland had noticed that Biet had described his visit to the island, and, accordingly, had the book cross-referenced under the subject heading *Barbados*, thus enabling its chance finding. The fact that the island's name is not mentioned on the title page almost certainly accounts for the book's apparent obscurity as a source for the study of Barbados' early history, and helps, for example, to explain why it is not catalogued under *Barbados* in the British Museum despite the fact, as I subsequently discovered, that the Museum has four copies of the book. Also, although very critical of Biet's work, the much quoted Father Labat, who visited Barbados in 1700, for some reason neglects to mention that Biet had also visited the island. Labat names the other places Biet voyaged to, and if Labat had also mentioned Barbados it is not unlikely that Biet's work would have been referred to in later histories of the island.³

Two chapters in Biet's account relate to Barbados. The first (chapter 31, pp. 268-284) is primarily a chronological narrative and relation of various incidents that befell him and his party during their stay on the island. Although this chapter contains some materials of interest, it also contains a number of personal digressions and tangential materials which relate to the internal problems of the French party itself. Thus, for the sake of brevity, I have omitted most of the passages which I felt had no descriptive value or no relevance to Barbados *per se*. The second chapter (chapter 32, pp. 285-295) is a more formal description of the island, and I have translated this in its entirety except for one minor digression. All of my comments in Section II are either bracketed or footnoted.

I have made some attempt to capture Biet's style, but I was often compelled, in the interest of clarity, to render the translation into modern English syntax and expression. For this reason as well some slight alterations were made in Biet's punctuation. Although these modifications result in a loss of some of the nuances of expression, I do not feel that this loss has any substantial effect upon the accuracy of the translation.

II. BIET'S ACCOUNT

[p. 268] Chapter 31. Our arrival in the island of Barbados where we were very well received by the English.

Hardly had our ship dropped anchor, and saluted the fort with three cannon shots, when five or six launches filled with traders came from the island to see what the ship was loaded with: Among these persons, I noticed a young man, who, having seen us, said in our language: "These men are certainly French." Each of us gathered his baggage making an effort to get on land quickly. Monsieur de

Bragelonne, [one of the leaders of the French group] accompanied by a few people, first went to visit the Governor of the island, to request permission for our party to enter his island under his protection, letting him know who we were. He did not have very much trouble in obtaining it, and the Governor offered his service assuring him that he and his whole party were very welcome, and that they could land and live in the island as if they were in France.. ..

[p. 269] Monsieur de Bragelonne did not return to the ship, he only sent the Governor's order, and meanwhile he looked for lodging for that night. The Governor's order having come, everybody landed.... When everyone had left the ship, I remained almost alone. No one had helped me to take out my chest, which only contained the articles necessary for celebrating the Holy Mysteries, [mass, communion, etc.] but God sent me help from elsewhere. This young man who I had noticed at the beginning, who had said "These men are certainly French", did not take his eyes off me; he circled about me, watching. He even tried to help me pull my chest from its place: He wanted to speak to me, then he did not dare. He said to himself "Is this Monsieur Biet, or is it not? He is a priest, this man does not have the appearance of one": for I was dressed in the clothing of a gentleman. "If it is he, what has he come to do here, priests are not welcome on this island. they discover he is a priest, in case it is him, they will handle him pretty roughly." Finally he could not contain himself anymore. When there were no more Frenchmen on the ship, he turned his face towards the sea, and called me by name. As I heard someone calling me, I raised my head to see -who it was. When this was done he came and threw himself at my neck, embracing me with transports of joy, which cannot be expressed in words, saying: "My good master, what good wind and what good fortune brought you here; is it possible that I have the blessing of seeing you?" I was completely surprised by these extraordinary embraces in a place so far away, where I could not have imagined finding an acquaintance. I was so startled that I could not even understand what [p. 270] he was saying to me. However, I asked him who he was. He said to-me: "What, my master, you do not know Donat Ossaye [O'Shea?] who you fed for four or five years in your house at Saint Genevieve de Senli, and who you cared for, with so much affection?" I recognized his voice and said to him: "Let me come so that I can look at you." Having recognized him, I embraced him just as strongly, and neither of us could refrain from shedding tears of joy. The sailors were all astonished to see us carry on so with each other, but they did not understand our conversation. I said to him: "God be blessed, you see that my party has left me. You must

help me." He had my chest and a parcel, in which there were some books, taken out, and had them put into a launch to carry them to shore. I gave him my purse, and he took some money to give what he found appropriate to the sailors who had helped us. This young man was of the Irish nation, nephew of my very good friend, a very knowledgeable man named Father John Ossay. [O'Shea?]. He had come to me from Ireland, to be educated among the young clergymen who were being prepared for, the church. He lived with me four or five years, wearing the cassock and performing clerical duties in my church. He left during my absence and I did not know what had become of him.

While we rowed towards the town, I asked him what he was doing in this place, and if he had not broken his vows to God. He assured me that this was not so, and that he had not had such a thought; that he had come to see this ship, whose chief effects belonged to his master who was now in Surinam. I asked him who his master was. He told me he was a gentleman whose name was Major Bayanne,⁴ that he was in this island with the Major's wife, whom he served as squire, and that he hoped she would soon go to meet her husband, and that she would embark in the same vessel that had brought- us. As I was getting ready to tell him of the joy I felt that he served such a worthy gentleman, from whom we had received so much [p. 271] courtesy, we arrived ashore; but my happiness was- somewhat- quelled.

One of our people who did not like me because I had always been critical of his dissolute life, was waiting for me on the wharf, thinking himself in a good position to revenge himself on me. As soon as he saw me land, and put my baggage down, he cried out against me: "A priest, a priest", by his shouts wanting to excite the English, who abhor priests, into throwing me into the sea or harming me in some other way.... I do not know what would have happened if most of the people on the roadstead had been able to understand French. My Irishman was grieved to see that a Catholic was so mean as to want to mistreat the priest who was his pastor. This young Irishman, who was well known on the island, made it known to everyone that I was a gentleman who he had served in France; for this I was very grateful....

[p.274] We resided in town for a while until our gentlemen [i.e., The leaders of the French group] made the acquaintance of a certain very capable French surgeon named Cesar du Mesnil. He had come to this island after the battle lost by the King of England, under whom he served as a soldier. Colonel Oldiph [Holdip], who had left the government of Surinam, had spoken to us about him, as being the Colonel's relation through marriage. He had acquired such a good reputation in this island, that he had married

one of the Colonel's own kinswomen, the widow of a very rich minister. Our gentlemen sought a way to be able to speak to this Doctor Cesar (this is the way the English refer to surgeons). He did not fail to come to look for them. They put themselves entirely in his hands for the conduct of their affairs, which he performed very well, also making a profit for them. First he counselled them to leave town, where they were spending too much money because of the large number of people they had with them, and to retire into the country (as they say in this place); that is to say, into some spot on the island; and that they ought to buy a plantation, as the English would say, or as we would say, a house and grounds, already built and planted. He informed them of one, which was very close to his, and which was for sale. It was all planted with things needed for subsistence: it had pigs, poultry, and similar things. Our gentlemen found this advice very good. He took them with him to see this plantation; they found it very suitable. They were also comforted by the fact that the plantation was only a musket shot away from his own, so that they could often get together. They settled on the price, and bought it for the quantity of twenty thousand pounds of sugar which amounts to, in terms of money, the sum of three thousand *lures* because fifty *bcus* are worth one thousand pounds of sugar .5

This Cesar du Mesnil also gave them the means of paying for this plantation by selling for them the Negro slaves, both men and women. There were three men, each one of whom had his wife and a child. He bought them at [p. 275] two thousand pounds of sugar per head; this made twelve thousand pounds of sugar. ⁶ He then advised them to retain only ten or twelve of their most reliable servants to cultivate their plantation, and to indenture the rest to whoever would want to have them, and what they would derive from this was more than sufficient to entirely pay for the plantation. ⁷ All this was done as he had advised them.

While our gentlemen, accompanied by Cesar du Mesnil, had gone into the country to visit and buy this plantation, I went for a walk alone in a secluded spot, between the orange and lemon trees, in order to say my prayers and to communicate with God, when I was surprised by a large man who came up to me. He was of the Irish nation, and a good looking man. He spoke to me in a corrupt language intermixed with Italian, Portuguese, and Provençal, or, to say it better, a corrupt language which those who sail on the Mediterranean understand very well. *Signor Padre*, he said, "I am a servant of your Lady". I gave him an angry look, and replied in this same language: "What do you mean, I am not a priest." He then started to show me a great deal of tenderness, making the sign of the cross to let me know that he was Catholic, but I rebuffed

him because I feared that he was someone who came to expose me and reveal me as a priest in court. He almost fell to his knees in front of me, once again making the sign of the cross, and recited the Lord's Prayer in Latin, the Hail Mary, the *Credo* and the *De Profundis* to certify that he believed in the prayer for the dead, and he told me he was Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman; that I had nothing to fear, that he clearly saw that I was a priest; that in having met me he considered himself happy, not only for his solace, but also for the solace of many other good Catholics who he would have me meet in this island, who were in great distress without any spiritual comfort. I was unable not to make myself known, and I could only confess to him that [p. 276] I was what he believed, and that I considered myself happy to be able to serve him and all good Catholics. He took me forthwith into a store to drink a brandy, as this *was* the custom of the country. I would have wronged him to refuse it. He did not fail to come to see me every day for the eight or ten days that we lived in the town. What vexed me was that I could not express my thoughts to him in a suitable manner, which compelled me to force myself to learn the English language so as to be capable of rendering a service to more than two thousand Catholics who were *in*_a this island. ^a

Monsieur Bigot [a member of Biet's group]. . . having all the freedom to do what he wanted, began to work in Barbados with a very fashionable French tailor, named Besse, who had worked at his trade in Paris, with the father of this Monsieur Bigot. Besse gave him work and in little time he earned five hundred pounds of sugar, which helped him pay his passage to France.... Bigot also had [p. 277] another job which permitted him to earn money; that is, he knew how to repair watches very well, to replace their springs, and recut the teeth on their wheels. There were many watches in the island, but there was no one there to repair them, so that this gave him a great many customers, and won for him the friendship of many important people.

Our gentlemen, having seen the plantation and having agreed to buy it, were promised by Cesar du Mesnil to deliver the sugar. Also given up to him were the six Negroes [see note 6] and their wives with their children, all very good Catholics, who were extremely sorrowed to see themselves sold as slaves in an island of heretics. The same was done to the indentured servants, but most of them bought their freedom themselves; for, since they knew trades, they made good money. There were some who earned up to twenty-five or thirty pounds of sugar per day . . .

[p. 278] Our gentlemen had our baggage taken to the plantation which they had bought, where we lived peacefully in the practice of our Holy Religion. I did the prayers daily, evening and morning.

I only said mass on holidays and Sundays, above all Sundays, when each one is free to do as he wants on the plantation, and to live with whatever religion he wants. Provided that one does not carry out religious exercises in public, no one bothers with what one is doing. Our gentlemen went to pass the time in the neighbourhood, and to pay visits to its chief personages. Every one was very pleased with the frequent visits of Monsieur de Bragelonne, and the ladies were delighted to converse with Madame du Plessis who was a very virtuous lady, to whom God had given great patience to put up with the disposition of a husband who was not like her. They were treated magnificently by everyone. Sometimes I went along but, not taking pleasure in this visiting because one has to drink in an extraordinary way, I did not always go

At these feasts there is nothing lacking in the way of meats which are found in the country, such as suckling pigs, turkey hens, capons, chickens and wood pigeon [*ramiers*]. There is no other game on the island. Very good mutton is eaten there. They cook everything very well and have excellent stews. When they dine, no one is forced to drink, one drinks willingly. They present whatever drink one wants: wines from Spain, Madeira, the Canaries; French wines, and sweetened Mauby for those who do not want wine. But after one has dined, and the table has been cleared, a trencher full of pipes and another full of tobacco is put on the table along with a bowl full of brandy, into which is put plenty of sugar, from the plant called *Noillice*.⁸ Egg yolks are also thrown in, then this is set alight, and they let it burn down to two-thirds of its former volume. The host takes a little silver cup, fills it with this liqueur [p. 279] and drinks to the health of whoever is in front of him. After he has drunk, he refills the cup and gives it to the person whose health he has just drunk; this person does the same thing to another, and this procedure is continued until there is nothing left in the bowl. During this festivity, well built young slaves refill the pipes which they present on their knees. The afternoon passes thus, in drinking and smoking, but quite often one is so drunk that he cannot return home. Our gentlemen found this life extremely pleasant.

The young man Donat came to see me sometimes, and also begged me to visit him. The plantation where he lived was only a league and a half from ours. I was there one time, when I took the opportunity to greet Mrs. Bayanne, [see note 4] his mistress, who was one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. I testified to the indebtedness we owed her husband, who had shown us so much good will and who had received us so well at Surinam during our disaster... In speaking to her I made myself understood by the means of Donat, who served as my interpreter. Then she sighed deeply, saying that

she would have hoped her husband had been on the island, and that we would have seen much more to him; that he had been banished by an extreme misfortune for having wanted to uphold the authority of his King against the unjust usurpation of my *lord* [in English in the text] Cromwell; but not having been the strongest, he had been compelled to leave the island in which he had been one of the most influential people. And that his plantations having been plundered and ruined he [p. 280] had gone to live in Surinam, where she hoped to meet him soon, and to embark in the same vessel on which we had come to this island. . . .

Towards Holy Week..I went to the Bridge [Bridgetown]. The first person I met as I entered town was Captain Halay⁹, who was delighted to see me. After having embraced me, he took me to a large dwelling, and led me into a very large room which was decorated with a great number of palm leaves; which led me to believe that this was the house of some Catholics who were observing the solemnity of Easter as much as they could. As the first gesture of welcome it is the custom to offer something to drink, and immediately I saw about ten or twelve persons coming towards me, both men and women, who kissed my hands and :threw themselves_ at my feet, crying with joy to find themselves so close to a priest. I was confused to see myself so honored, and by the fact that I was unable to console-them, -for I could neither address them nor understand what they were asking me through the intermediary of Captain Halay who acted as my interpreter. I took my leave of these good Catholics, telling them that I was only returning to our plantation, to use the island term, [p. 281] to apply myself entirely to learning their language in order to render them assistance; and that since God had not permitted I work in the conversion of the savage Indians, I would stay here with them for their solace and to care for the health of their souls. They displayed a great deal of happiness at my promise which I was unable to carry out, God having ordained otherwise.

Around the twelfth 'or fifteenth of April, a French ship of around two hundred tons, commanded by Captain le Bas of Dieppe and chartered by a gentleman called Monsieur de Brie, arrived at the roadstead of this island. Its load was solely brandy which it had come to trade in exchange for sugar. Notice of this was given to our gentlemen, who at once went to the Bridge, which is the town of this island. I accompanied them; it was to learn if they could give us some news about our vessel the Charity,¹⁰ about which they could tell us nothing. Our gentlemen had a big meeting with Captain le Bas and Monsieur de Brie. This captain promised to help them a great deal in case our vessel the Charity landed at Martinique, where they were returning in two weeks

The arrival of this ship in this place and the handsome promises that Captain le Bas had made to our gentlemen, made them ask me to go to Martinique with a power of attorney signed by Messieurs de Bragelonne and du Plessis, and sealed with the Company's seal, and with a letter of credit to Monsieur du Parquet [the Governor of Martinique] requesting him to give me his protection and admission to his island, in order to execute what was carried in my power of attorney; if by chance our vessel the Charity landed at his island. I yielded to their request, so as to render this service to the [p. 282] Company, although I was pained to leave this island because of the promise I had made to the Catholics to live among them for their solace. . . . I resolved myself to making this trip, for we cannot go against the order of God. . . .

[p. 284] I went to take my leave of all our friends, and above all of Cesar du Mesnil and Madame du Plessis, with the hope of seeing them again, but I had not reckoned with fate. When I saw it was close to the time that the vessel of Captain le Bas was obliged to leave I prepared my parcel, in which I put all of my best things for my needs, for our gentlemen gave me nothing. Above all I did not forget to take the notes upon which I have written this history. I had already written it once with Monsieur Bigot, who had helped me with its composition, and who can testify to the truth of what am now saying; but it fell into the hands of our gentlemen who had it burned. With God's help I was able to take the notes back to France. I had my parcel carried to Bridgetown, and we embarked the last day of April. It is not reasonable that I leave this beautiful and rich island, in which I received so much courtesy, without giving a description of it.

[p. 285] Chapter 32. Description of the situation, climate and wealth of the island of Barbados, and the customs, morals and religion of its inhabitants

This island is one of the most beautiful in the Antilles. It is located at a latitude of 13 degrees 10 minutes, and is more remote from the mainland than any of the other islands. It is the first island facing towards the north wind. It is beautifully situated, being flat and having no high mountains, but only hills which are fertile and arable up to their summits. There is no useless land and no land which cannot be cultivated. The island has an oval shape, and is little watered by streams for there are only two or three small ones. There are a few places with springs, but these are infrequent; as a result there is sometimes need of water during the time of greatest dryness. The inhabitants also take great care to dig ponds in tree shaded spots so that they do not dry up too soon. They also very carefully collect rainwater which falls on the roofs of the houses. The island's very large port and roadstead is shaped like a crescent,

and can hold two hundred vessels in security and shelter from storms. This does not prevent hurricanes from committing havoc, as had occurred a little before our arrival in this island. We were still able to see the wrecks of ten ships which had perished. . . . [At this point Biet digresses into a 21 page discussion of hurricanes in general, resuming his description of Barbados on page 288.]

The town is built along a section of the port. It carries the name of *Bridge*. There are easily three or four hundred houses which are all inns or stores filled with goods. All the houses are built of timber and boards which accounts for why the boards and planks from Surinam sell so well on the island." Even the Governor's house is made entirely of wood. It is on the eastern tip of the island, and makes up one of the points of the port's crescent. From his bedroom the Governor can see all the vessels in the port. There is a beach behind the Governor's dwelling where one can find a great many very beautiful and extremely interesting shells. This town is heavily populated, above all with merchants, because it is to this place that all people from the country districts transport the goods and wares that are produced on their plantations [p. 289] Few of these merchants have houses in town which explains why, when they come theratcacarryntheir lousiness, they retire winto taverns or inns where one does not pay money for his expenses. They charge from ten or fifteen pounds of sugar per head, and the number of meals taken _loyaeach_person is written down. When one has eaten meals costing around three or four hundred pounds of sugar, the sugar is sent to the inn or tavern from the plantation. There is no other town in this island, but most of the plantations in the country are like as many villages whose size varies according to the number of slaves each plantation has. The plantation master's house is ordinarily handsome and has many rooms. Usually, however, there is only one bedroom off the hall; the whole house being built of timber and boards. I have only seen two or three houses built of stone in the island. The sugar works take up a lot of space. There are also the cabins of the indentured servants who are native born English, Irish, or Scotch, and the dwellings of the Negro slaves. Each household has its own dwelling; they are all close to one another. This whole collection resembles a village. There are some plantations where there are two or three hundred persons such as the ones of Colonel Drax, Captain Strange and similar people.

The climate of this island is about-the same as that of Cayenne, hot and humid, which accounts for why Barbados produces the same things as Cayenne. The land in Barbados is equally easy to cultivate. There is no hunting or game, except for wood pigeon which, however, is scarce as it has been much hunted,¹² Fishing in Barbados is not the best: there are fewer fish available than the town needs,

and people in the country scarcely see -them." In this respect, there is a great difference between these islands and the mainland which is abundant in everything.

The wealth of this island consists of sugar. Sugar cane or reed is planted in the countryside as far as the eye can see. Such a great quantity of sugar is made on the island that every year over two hundred ships are loaded to transport it to all parts of Europe. They trade it for merchandise and goods they need, [p. 290] at the price of fifteen francs the hundred-weight, which is fifty *ecus* the thousand, and there are plantations where they make four hundred thousand. They also grow a great deal of cotton and ginger, both of which grow in such great abundance that once they have been planted they cannot be completely harvested. Tobacco is only produced on the island for the use of the English and the slaves who are given some time off when working, in addition to the meal time, to rest and smoke tobacco. Their greatest wealth are their slaves, and there is not one slave who does not make a profit of more than one hundred *ecus* each year for his master. Each slave does not cost four *ecus* per year for his upkeep.¹⁴ The slaves go around almost entirely naked, except on Sundays when they put on some worthless canvas breeches and a shirt. The small Negroes and Negresses always go about completely naked until they are fourteen or fifteen years old. As for their food, there is no nation which feeds its slaves as badly as the English because for all meals the slaves only get potatoes which serve them as their bread, their meat, their fish, in fact, everything. The slaves raise some poultry so as to have eggs which they give to their little children. They are only given meat one time in the whole year, namely Christmas Day, which is the only holiday observed in this island. The English servants and those of this nation [i.e., France]¹⁵ are not much better treated. They are indentured for seven years, and also get only potatoes. The masters are obliged to support them, but God knows how they are maintained. All are very badly treated." When they work the overseers, who act like those in charge of galley slaves, are always close by with a stick with which they often prod them when they do not work as fast as is desired. I found it strange that they sent from England those persons who were suspected of being Royalists, and who had been taken prisoners in the battle which the King lost. They were sold, especially when it was discovered that they were Catholics, [p. 291] the husband in one place, the wife in another, and the children in another place so as not to receive any solace from each other. They treat their Negro slaves with a great deal of severity. If some go beyond the limits of the plantation on a Sunday they are given fifty blows with a cudgel;¹⁷ these often bruise them severely. If they commit some other slightly more serious offense they

are beaten to excess, sometimes up to the point of applying a fire-brand all over their bodies which makes them shriek with despair. I saw a poor Negro woman, perhaps thirty-five or forty years old, whose body was full of scars which she claimed had been caused by her master's having applied the fire-brand to her: this horrified me. As these poor unfortunates are very badly fed, a few occasionally escape during the night and go to steal a pig or something similar from a neighbouring plantation. But, if they are discovered, there is no forgiving them. One day I went to visit my Irishman [Captain Halay?]. He had in irons one of these poor Negroes who had stolen a pig. Every day, his hands in irons, the overseer had him whipped by the other Negroes until he was all covered with blood. The overseer, after having had him treated thus for seven or eight days, cut off one of his ears, had it roasted, and forced him to eat it. He wanted to do the same to the other ear and the nose as well." I interceded on behalf of this poor unfortunate, and I pleaded so well with the overseer that the Negro was freed from his torment. With tears in his eyes, he came to throw himself at my feet to thank me. It is an unhappy state of things to treat with such great severity creatures for whom Jesus Christ shed his blood. It is true that one must keep these kinds of people obedient, but it is Anhuman_to_treat them with, so much harshness. Also these poor unhappy people tremble when they speak, and, for my part, I assess the condition of our galley slaves, who are condemned for their crimes, as being better than that of these poor unfortunates. All of this does not make them refrain, when they have a little rest on Sunday, from wonderful jumping and dancing; [p. 292] especially when the master makes them the present of a flagon of brandy they sing his praises as if he had done them a great deal of good. The masters never think of their slaves' souls. One does not speak to them about any religion or religious exercises. They content themselves by baptising their children in the house, and if any of them have any tinge of the Catholic religion, which they received among the Portuguese,¹⁹ they keep it the best they can, doing their prayers and worshipping God in their hearts. Those who do not have any knowledge of religion live like beasts, and are in just as deplorable a state as savages, except when regenerated by baptism.

In speaking of morals, extravagance is very great among the English in these parts. They came here in order to become wealthy. The ladies and young women are as well dressed as in Europe, and they economize on nothing-to dress well. One will not find it difficult to pay eight or ten pounds of sugar in order to buy a bit of silk-lace. One can judge by this little thing what they will do in order to have a suit of clothes. For the cut of one very simple dress coat a tailor is paid one hundred pounds of sugar. One furnishes his

house sumptuously. Things that are the finest in England and elsewhere are found in the island.²⁰ Men and women go well mounted on very handsome horses which are covered with very rich saddle-cloths. The extravagance of the table is not less. Everything is there in abundance, except that game is very rare. They lack no other meats and have all sorts of fowl with which their farm yards are filled. They have all kinds of drinks: the best wines from more than six areas in Europe, brandy, *Rosolis*, and many artificial drinks which are excellent. One could always drink whatever one wished. It is not necessary for them to have taverns in the countryside, for when an English lady sees someone pass by she freely asks if he needs anything. She invites him into the house, has him *sit* in a hammock, which is a cotton bed [p. 293] made in the Indian style, and she immediately brings some brandy or any other drink that is desired. If one wants to smoke, she fills a pipe, lights it herself, and presents it when it is lit. She does this with such graciousness and with such good nature that one can ask for nothing more. Those who travel in the country experience this all the time. The greatest of all the vices which prevail in this country is lewdness. It is a horrible thing to think about: adulterers, incest and all the rest. I will not say anymore on this. Drunkenness is great, especially among the lower classes. Cursers are rare because the police punish them severely. There are arguments, but no one would dare to fight with swords for he would be punished at once. They settle their differences by fist fighting. They give each other black eyes, scratch each other, tear each other's hair, and do similar things. The on-lookers let them do this and surround them so as to see who will be victorious. If they fall to the ground, they are picked up, and they fight until they can no longer do so and are forced to give up. After seeing this, one would say that they were in a cat fight.

As for religion, Calvinism is the only one that is professed in public. It is for this reason that the whole island is divided into four parishes,²⁴ each one carrying the name of some saint. Bridgetown's parish is named Saint Michael. There is another named Holy Cross, [*Sainte Croix*] one Saint George, and one other whose name I do not know. There is a minister in each parish who is not hindered from preaching any kind of sermon. Only the minister in town is frequented, for very few people in the country leave their plantations in order to hear a sermon; and, although there are, more than twenty thousand souls in the island, it was reported to me that there were not more than four hundred in the parish of Saint George, which was where we lived, who had taken Holy Communion at Easter. And to tell the truth, they have almost no religion. Old Captain Oldiph [Holdip], one of the eldest on this island, told me "It is enough to believe that there is a [p. 294] God, and that Jesus Christ died for us. There

are Catholics, who are not in small numbers, and even Jews. All are given freedom of belief, provided that they do nothing to be conspicuous in public, to such an extent that on Sunday one is free to do what one wants in his house, no one bothers to see what he is doing. That is why I carried on all of my religious functions with great freedom. There is no sign of religion in this island except for the observance of Sunday which is inviolably kept. Mainly in the morning, no one is seen in the country-side or the taverns in town, for if someone was met in a tavern, both the drinker and the tavern-keeper would be severely punished.²² One day old Captain Oldiph (one must note that all plantation masters carry the title of Captain or Colonel)²³ related to me how this island had been settled, and said that he had been one of the first settlers. It was certainly some thirty years ago, he told me, when seven or eight Englishmen, among them Colonel Drax, entered this island having been carried there by one of their ships. They sheltered in a cave in the rocks. They lived by hunting, which was good enough, and from provisions which had been left them by the ship. They cleared a piece of land which they planted in tobacco, and this grew so well that they produced an abundance which obliged the head of the band to carry it to England-in-the first vessel they met. As tobacco was scarce enough, he made a lot of money from it which gave him the means to bring forty or fifty men back with him.²⁴ He himself found out that this island's tobacco was not the best quality; that is why they wanted to see if cotton and ginger would be better, but they found nothing which was able to succeed better than sugar which had enabled them to become so rich that they all lived like little princes. This is what had made the island so heavily populated in such a short time. I had been to see the plantation of this Colonel Drax, who received me very courteously with a young man from Rouen, named [p. 295] Monsieur Raince, who is one of those who refines sugar. It was quite a sight to see 200 slaves working with sugar. While we were in this island, this Colonel Drax embarked on a trip to England. We saw the esteem in which he was held, for the day of his departure he came to visit the Governor who entertained him and many others. Then, after dinner, he was accompanied to the place where the ship was to embark by more than two hundred of the island's most important people, all well mounted and marching two by two in a column headed by the Governor and Colonel Drax. As he arrived at the embarkation place, the ship fired a volley of all its cannons, and, having been put in the launch to go out to the vessel, all the persons accompanying him fired their pistols. Then, having seen him go up into the vessel, they turned back so as to escort the Governor, marching in the same order in which they had come. [end of Chapter 32]

III

Aside from its intrinsic interest as an eye-witness account of Barbados at this early period, Biet's narrative takes on especial value for researchers concerned with the island's early social and cultural history. It adds to a handful of known eye-witness descriptive accounts which deal with the period of the late 1640s to early 1650s, a period of great population movement and social change, during which the island's transformation into a major producer of sugar, begun slightly earlier, was still an on-going process.

Compared to what is known about political, administrative, and economic conditions at this time, relatively less is known about the island's social life and customs. To a large extent this is due to the lack of researchers who have interested themselves in such topics, but it is also due to the lack of primary source materials—the vast majority of such materials having immediate relevance to political and economic matters. Thus, Biet's account, however skeletal, biased, and naive it might be, assumes an importance which it probably would not have were there more detailed accounts available of social customs and behavior at this early period.

To be sure, a broad outline of Barbadian society at this time can be given at present; yet much more detail remains to be recaptured in order to get a fuller grasp of the early roots from which later creole culture was to spring. Although Biet hardly approaches Ligon's relative wealth of descriptive materials, he nonetheless supplements and complements various aspects of Ligon's picture. Perhaps the most reliable information derives from events in which he himself participated or was able to observe directly. Other information, which he seems to have acquired through hearsay, would have to be evaluated more cautiously. In general, it is difficult to say how much Biet's understanding of life around him, and his description of what he observed and heard, was blocked by, for example, his inadequate to non-existent comprehension of English, the brevity of his stay, and his rather prudish and sanctimonious personality. Doubtless, these are some of the factors which would have to be taken into consideration in evaluating his book as a source. A full assessment of the extent to which Biet's observations adequately reflect the nature of Barbadian society at the time, and the degree to which his account enables a fuller reconstruction of that society, would take us much further than our immediate aims which are simply to make available to a wider audience a hitherto little known account of the island. However, considering the "natural" biases and the superficial, and often slovenly, reporting often found in seventeenth century writings, the culture historian

derives obvious advantages by having a number of contemporary and independent first-hand accounts which touch on little known facets of Barbadian society at a crucial period in its development.

NOTES

1. *Voyage de la France Equinoxiale en l'isle de Cayenne Entrepris par les François en l'Année M. DC. LII.* Paris 1664.
2. These materials were sought in connection with my present study of the social and cultural life of the African population in Barbados from the 17th to early 19th centuries. I am indebted to the United States National Institute of Health and National Science Foundation for their support of this research.
3. Labat, in the preface to his first volume, briefly reviews the works of Frenchmen who had written about the West Indies before him. After commenting on Du Tertre's work (1667), which he admired despite faults he found with it, he turns to Met in the following terms: "He [Biet] makes it apparent that he had seen nothing in Cayenne, still less in Martinique, where he did not set foot on land, and that he only employed the little time he wasted in Guadeloupe to listen to the slanders of certain wealthy persons with which he filled his work in order to spread these slanders in France, and have them given credence because they came from a man whose character rendered him respectable" (1722: xi), my translation.
4. This is undoubtedly Major William Byam who, with other prominent Royalists such as the Walronds, was forced to leave Barbados in 1652. Byam joined the English settlement in Surinam, and had been very hospitable to Biet's group: Later, Byam became Governor of Surinam (*vide* Burns 1951: 235 ff., Williamson 1926: Passim and Below).
5. The *livre* and *écu* are obsolete French currencies, the latter corresponding to the crown. One *écu* was normally equivalent to three *limes*.
6. The French had brought these persons with them from Surinam. The number Biet says were sold does not correspond with the amount he says were paid for them, unless it can be assumed that the children were not paid for. There is also a discrepancy between the number of slaves cited here and the number cited on page 277 of the book. On the latter page he says there were six, rather than three, men plus their wives and children (see Note 28).
7. Ligon notes that it was common for planters to "sell their servants to one another for the time they have to serve; and in exchange receive any commodities that are in the island..." (1657: 59).

By the price, the general circumstances of the French party, and the number of persons recommended to work it, the plantation probably was a relatively small farm, one of the numerous ones which were being sold during the transformation of the economy into one based on large land holdings devoted to sugar production. Ligon, in a frequently-quoted passage, comments that in the early 1640's Major Hilliard's 500 acre plantation could have, been bought for 400 pounds sterling, but subsequently half of the plantation was purchased for 7000 pounds; to this he adds, "And I believe when the small plantations in poor man's hands, often, twenty, or thirty acres, which are too small to lay to that work, [i.e. sugar production] be bought up by great men, and got together, into

plantations of five, six, or seven hundred acres, that two thirds of the island will benefit for plantations of sugar, which will make it one of the richest spots of earth under the sun" (1657:86). (See Note 28).

8. "Dans laquelle on met quantite de sucre de l'herbe qu'on appelle *Noillice*". I have been unable to identify this word NOILLICE in a number of French dictionaries; it may be Biet's misspelling of an English word.
9. Although Hallay is not identified, it is likely that he is the Irish Catholic who accosted Biet while praying (see above pp. 9-15). Hallay may be Biet's misspelling of John Hallet (*vide* Spurdle n.d : 81, 194).
10. *Charity*, the French Company's ship, was supposed to be on its way from France to Cayenne. An English captain who had arrived in Barbados a little earlier reported that he had seen it in Madeira.
11. The ship which brought Biet to Barbados from Surinam was primarily loaded with boards to be sold in the island. Biet notes that in Barbados boards "... are rare, and are sold very well in exchange for sugar and ginger" (p. 266); another indication of the depletion of the forests, since Ligon's visit in 1647-1650, as a consequence of the rapid expansion of sugar production
- 1⁹. Ligon notes, in Barbados "...there is a sort of pigeons, which come from the Leeward islands at one time of the year, and it is in September; and stay till Christmas be past, and then return again: But very many of them ne'r make returns, to tell news of the good fruit they found there: For, they are so fat, and of such excellent tastes, as many fowlers kill them with guns, upon the trees" (1657 :35).
13. "Now for fish. though the island stands as all islands do, invironed with, the sea (and therefore is not like to be unfurnished of that provision) yet, the planters are so good husbands, and tend their profits so much, as they will not spare a Negro's absence so long, as to go to the Bridge and fetch it. And the fishermen seeing their fish lie upon their hands, and stink (which it will do in Jesse than six hours) forbear to go to sea to take it; only so much as they can have present vent for, at the taverns at the Bridge; and thither the planters come, when they have mind to feast themselves with fish..." (Ligon) 1657:35).
- 14 Assuming an *ecu* to be the equivalent of a crown (see note 5), four *ecus* would be about a pound. This is very close to Ligon's estimate of the expenses involved in maintaining one hundred slaves; *viz* ...for forraign provisions of victuals for our servants and some of our slaves, we will allow yearly 100 [pounds] ...cloathing of fifty men-Negres 15 [pounds] ... cloathing of fifty women-Negres 20 [pounds] . . ." (1657:116).
15. "Les engagez Anglois & de cette nation ne sent gueres mieux traitez" (p. 290). In this passage it is quite clear that Biet is referring to Frenchmen, and other passages also corroborate the presence of Frenchmen in Barbados who were not members of Biet's party. How Frenchmen came to Barbados at this early date is of interest, and direct evidence is provided by Du Tertre (1667, Volume II: 464-466).

In his discussion of trade with the Antilles in the 1630s and 1610s, Du Tertre mentions that an important commodity consisted of young men or boys who were "sold to the inhabitants [of the islands], to serve like slaves for three years, at the usual price of 1000 or 1200 pounds of tobacco, but they were much dearer when they knew a trade ... [ship captains often had men in France who tempted

young Frenchmen with stories] making them believe a thousand wonders" about the islands (pp. 464-465). Of particular relevance here is a letter written in 1640 by General de Poincy, the French Governor of St. Kitts, addressed to the Company of the Isles of America in France — a letter reproduced by Du Tertre. In it de Poincy says that two French captains "...entrapped by their deceit, two hundred young Frenchmen, among whom there are some of good family. They had them detained for the period of three months...and then had them indentured for 5, 6, & 7 years, for which they were paid 900 pounds of cotton a piece in the island of Barbados" (Vol. II: 465-466). Frenchmen reported on later in seventeenth century Barbados (*vide* Connell 1957b 167) probably included the survivors of this group as well as the persons sold by Biet's "gentlemen" (see above). Another lead is provided by Cromwell's practise of shipping captured pirates to Barbados: "They were a mixed crew, including English, Irish, French, and Dutch" (Harlow 1926:297).

16. Commenting on this topic, Ligon says: "As for the usage of the servants, it is much as the master is, mercifull or cruell; those that are mercifull, treat their servants well, both in their meat, drink, and lodging, and give them such work, as is not unfit for Christians to do. But if the Masters be cruell, the servants have very wearisome and miserable lives. . . Truly, I have seen such cruelty there done to servants, as I did not-think-one-Christian could have done to another. But, as discreeter and better natur'd men have come to rule there, the servants lives have been much better'd..." (1657:44).
17. A law of June 1652, "An Act to Restrain the Wandering of Servants and Negroes", prohibited both slaves and servants (early laws in Barbados often regulated servant and slave behavior in the same Act) from leaving their plantations without the master's written permission. For the infraction of this law, a person finding someone else's slave had the right to "whip and correct" the slave before returning him to his owner. Nothing, however, is specified as to what the master might do, and the term "correct" could be subject to wide interpretation. White servants convicted of the same offense had their terms of indenture extended by one month for every two hours of their absence (Jennings 1654: 81-83). Not only were these and similar restraining laws characteristically broken throughout the days of slavery, but, with respect to plantation slaves in particular, the penalties for their infraction were more often governed by the owner or manager's discretion than by an dictum set down in the law (see note 18).
18. Such types of punishment were sometimes codified. For instance in the 1688 "Act for the Governing of Negroes" (the first all inclusive law solely concerned with defining the status of the slave and regulating his behavior) it was specified that a slave convicted the first time for stealing property valued at under twelve pence was "to be publicly and severely whipped, not exceeding forty lashes." For the second conviction on a similar offense, the penalty was having "his or their noses slit, and be branded with a hot iron, that the mark thereof may remain." If the person was found guilty a third time, he or she "shall be adjudged to suffer death" (Hall 1764: 116-117). Cases of slaves being executed for stealing are not unusual in the 17th and early 18th century records, but English law at this time also "provided -the death sentence for eases of petty theft and other minor offenses" (Harlow 1926:298).

Although penalties imposed upon Negroes were usually physically more severe than those imposed on whites, especially in the post-Restoration period, lest one lose perspective on the age we are dealing with at the time of Biet's *visit*, note, for example, the following 1652 law: it provides that any white person who commits "4 fraudulent, or, deceitful sale... of servants, cattel, Negroes... with 941.

intent to deceive his creditors, or any purchasers, shall pay double the value of the thing to the party grieved, and suffer six months imprisonment without any bail, and stand in the pillory two hours with his ears nailed thereonto, with a paper in his hat, signifying the cause of his punishment" (Jennings 1654:27, my italics).

19. Ligon also notes the presence of Negroes who "have been bred up amongst the Portugalls" (1657:52). These persons probably came from Brazil where some of the Portuguese sugar growing areas had been taken over by the Dutch. The Dutch, being driven out of Brazil, played a fundamental role in providing the capital and technical know-how, as well as slaves, for the sugar revolution in Barbados in the 1640's (*vide* Harlow 1926: 40-43; Davis 1887: 69-70).
20. *Vide* Connell (1957a) for an intensive detailing of the kinds of things to which Biet alludes. This article also well reflects how much more information is available about Barbados' early culture history than is commonly supposed, and that a variety of sources are available for the extraction of this information
21. According to Jennings (1654:31), a Barbados law of 1652 divided the island into five parishes although these may refer to the five districts of the Court of Common Pleas (*vide* Harlow 1926:335). Harlow reports that the island was divided into six parishes in 1629 (1926:14,330), and then into eleven by Governor Bell in the 1640's (Harlow 1926:25; Spurdle n.d. :12). Biet also seems to be confused on the parish of Christ Church.
22. A law of the period required constables and churchwardens "in some time of Divine service any Sunday, to walk and search taverns, alehouses, victualling houses, or other houses, where they doe suspect lewd and debauched company to frequent. And if they shall find any drinking, swearing, and. gameing or otherwise misdemeaning themselves, that forthwith they shall apprehend such persons, and bring them to the stocks there to be imprisoned the space of four hours" (quoted in Harlow 1926:27).
23. Plantation owners ordinarily had special obligations of command in the island's militia (e.g. Jennings 1654:115 *ff.*) which accounts, in large part, for the prevalence of military titles among them. In addition, during the Civil War, Royalists officers either volunteered or were compelled to go to Barbados (Harlow 1926 : 45); some of them became owners of plantations.
24. Biet's relation of Captain. Holdip's account, although generally coincident with what is already known, nonetheless adds some novel details to more widely accepted versions (cf. Ligon 1657:23-25; Harlow 1926:3-6). For details on Colonel Holdip of Surinam (Biet p. 274) see Williamson (1923: *Passim*).
25. The most outstanding of these is obviously Ligon (1657), but Biet's account is richer than most of the others for its details on social life and customs (cf. Anon 1650-1652; Plantagenet 1648; Whistler 1654-1655).
26. *Vide* Harlow (1926), Burns (1954), Spurdle (n.d.)
27. *Vide* Harlow (1926, esp. p. 268) and Starkey (1939:51-75).
28. Shortly after I received the proofs for this article, I came across an item (Hawtayne 1896) containing printed extracts from a number of 17th century Barbados documents. Two of these extracts, from the 1650's, elucidate Biet's

mention (pp. 274-275) of the sale of Negroes and the purchase of the small plantation by the French group. One document notes that John de Bragelonne. "one of ye privy councill of ye King of France, the first director of ye companie of ye North Cape", and John Chartrain du Plessy "councillour of ye said King and the first Lieutent Generall of the Constably of ye said Kingdom of France, Director and Keeper of ye scale of ye said companie doe certifie... [that] we have absolutely and fully sold. .. unto Cesar Dumsoll, of the island of Barbados, gent: 6 negroes, etc." (Hawtayne 1896: 107-108). Cesar Dumsoll would be Cesar Du Mesnil who is referred to frequently by Biet. Hawtayne evidently omits the rest of this sale document which would have included the purchase price of the Negroes, but he is prompted to remark: That so high and mighty Seigneurs should have condescended to such small dealings as the sale of six Negroes is wonderful" (1896:108). Had Hawtayne, who knew a considerable amount about Barbados' early history, been aware of Biet's account, the reason for the sale would have been readily apparent. The second item which is Hawtayne's synopsis of the original deed of sale, notes that in 1654 "John Spence conveyed to John Bragelongue and John Catarine du Plessis, in consideration of 15,000 lbs. of muscavado sugar, 192 acres in St. George's parish" (1896:108). Biet apparently erred in stating (p. 274) that 20,000 pounds of sugar were paid for the plantation.

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