

# THE DANISH WEST INDIES

“How the colonies were actually governed; what the colonists did at work and play; how the mother country stamped her image upon them, and to what extent the lineaments of that image were modified by contact with local forces - these are matters that interest the reader of to-day.” - W. R. Shepherd

THE DANISH WEST INDIES

UNDER COMPANY RULE

(1671-1754)

with a supplementary Chapter, 1755-1917

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With an introduction

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MAPS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

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## PREFACE

Since the opening of the Panama Canal, the attention of the United States has been drawn more and more to those Caribbean and Gulf regions, which were, until comparatively recent times, the economic center of the New World and the source of a considerable part of that wealth which kept the wheels of industry running in the Old. If Tobacco was King in the seventeenth, and Cotton in the nineteenth, then Sugar surely held the scepter in the eighteenth century.

This book was written before the United States began the negotiations that have resulted in the transfer of the Danish West Indian islands to the United States. The increased interest of Americans in Caribbean lands, and the scarcity of authoritative historical books upon the subject will it is hoped justify its appearance now. It assumes a certain curiosity on the part of the reader, first, as to how the Danish-Norwegian state became interested in the islands off the Spanish Main, and second, how so small a state has managed to retain its hold for nearly two centuries and a half.

The pages which follow record an episode in the time when Sugar was King. They are the result of an attempt to identify and appraise a number of official and other papers found in the Bancroft Collection at the University of California. These documents had come from the Danish West Indian islands, and were first brought to the writer's attention by Professor Henry Morse Stephens under whose inspiration and guidance the subsequent investigations were carried on. The paucity of the printed material dealing with the history of Danish colonization in America led to a search in the Danish libraries and archives for further light. The entire archives of the Danish West India and Guinea Company were found substantially intact in their repository in the state archives building of Denmark near Christiansborg castle. Except for the labors of a few scholars in search of genealogical and biographical information, the collection had to all appearances scarcely been touched.

With such a wealth of material to go through, the writer cannot claim to have exhausted his subject, but he hopes to have made more intelligible than hitherto the story of one of those commercial joint-stock companies that were so closely associated with the seventeenth and eighteenth century exploitation of New World resources.

Treated by itself, colonial history is well-nigh meaningless. Only when considered as part of European history - indeed, when related somehow to universal history - does it become vital. It is obvious that the political and economic development of American Colonies cannot be adequately followed without giving considerable attention to the forces that prompted, and largely guided, commercial ventures. The present work is the history of a company composed mainly of Danish business men intent upon embracing such commercial opportunities as the New World seemed to offer them. Their headquarters were in Copenhagen, their factories, or trading centers, in the West Indies and on the Guinea coast. Business was the chief aim, the establishment of a colony an incident, of their endeavors. Yet one cannot be understood apart from the other.

The rôle played by Denmark-Norway in Tropical colonization was indeed not large and not infrequently the interest of the English - or American - reader will center in what the men of the North saw and heard in the West Indies, rather than what they did there. Yet, there was enough of what might be called economic solidarity in the Western commercial world to lend the Danish occupation a genuine interest. Despite local differences, the experiences of the Danes were fairly typical of those of the Dutch, the French, the English, and even the Spanish merchants and administrators. The physical conditions with which all had to contend were nearly identical. The political and economic ideas which the Europeans who sought to earn their livelihood in the West Indies brought with them had many points of similarity. In fact, the population of many of the islands was surprisingly cosmopolitan.

In the eighty-four years of its existence, the Company led a varied and interesting life. During its early years it survived the competition of Dutch, French, English, and Brandenburg business, whether private or corporate. With the opening of the new century it experienced the welcome, if rather hectic, glow of a period of prosperity induced by a general European war, that of the Spanish Succession. In the era of speculation and depression that followed the return of peace, the Danish Company had its experience with paper money expedients as a cure for hard times.

In the history of the slave trade and of that tropical agriculture which it was calculated to promote, and in the growth of the idea of self-government, the experience of the Danish colonies is suggestive. Though St. Thomas has been popularly associated with buccaneers and pirates, some of whose exploits are recorded in the following pages, it has scarcely been suspected heretofore that a considerable part of Captain Kidd's "treasure" found its way to the warehouses and ships of Danes and Brandenburgers on the island.

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But what was after all far more important than random calls by pirates was the fact that the Company helped to supply Europe with sugar, cotton and what are still known in Danish shops as colonial wares. Moreover, it served as a training school for statesmen who after this experience found the transition from the business of the Company to affairs of state less difficult to compass.

The writer has not hesitated to let the actors tell their own story, but to obviate needless obstruction to the narrative, and for the benefit of those readers who may care to probe deeper

into the subject, such illustrative and statistical material as could not well be included in the body of the text has been incorporated into the appendix. Many names of characters and places not familiar to English readers in their Danish form have been anglicized where possible. The following list of Danish equivalents for the rendering of proper names given in the text is offered in the hope of preventing undue confusion for such as may care to consult the original records.

Christian = Christiern; George = Jörgen; Peter = Peder, Pieter; John = Jan, Johan, Johannes, Jens; Oliver = Oliger; William = Willem, Wilhelm; Severin = Sören; Also *Unicorn* = *Enhiörningen*; *Unity* = *Eenigheden*; *Electoral Prince* = *Churprinz*; *the Peace* = *Freden*; *the Gilded Crown* = *den Forgyltde Krone*; *the Red Cock* = *den Röde Hane*.

To friends who have assisted him in numerous ways, the writer wishes to express his gratitude. Chief among these is Professor H. Morse Stephens, Sather Professor of History at the University of California, to whose generous encouragement this work owes its inception. He has followed the progress of the investigations with a never-flagging interest, and has always been ready to place his great store of knowledge at the writer's disposal. To Professor Charles H. Hull of Cornell University for patient guidance and valued instruction during a year at that institution as Fellow in American History, to Professor Herbert E. Bolton of the University of California for constructive criticism, to Mr. Herbert I. Priestley for valuable bibliographical hints, to Professor W. R. R. Pinger and Miss Florence Livingstone for suggestions as to style, sincere thanks are due. To the officials in the Danish archives and libraries whose services were generously placed at his disposal, the author takes pleasure in acknowledging his debt, and especially for former *Rigsarkivar*, Dr. V. Secher and his staff at the state and provincial archives, Dr. V. Christensen of the *Raadstuearkiv*, Professor Knud Fabricius, Dr. Ove Paulsen, the officials of the Royal and University Libraries, and to Fru Anna Backer. Their uniform courtesy and helpfulness are among the writer's pleasant memories of his year in Copenhagen.

To His Excellency Dr. Maurice Francis Egan, American minister to Denmark, the writer desires to express his gratitude for assistance in securing access to materials. To the Regents of the University of California for aid in making possible the procuring of needed transcripts, grateful acknowledgment is due.

The difficulty of correcting proof and checking up references to manuscript sources when archives are thousands of miles removed from the scene of writing may serve to explain, though not to excuse, textual errors. The writer is indebted to Professor Hull for generous assistance in reading the final proofs.

The present work, submitted as a thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of California in May, 1915, is the first volume of three which the writer hopes to devote to the history of the Danish West India Islands. The second will follow the fortunes of the colonies down to the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and the third will bring the story down to the present time. In view, however, of the current interest aroused in the islands as a result of their purchase by the United States, a supplementary chapter has been added to this volume, summarizing their more recent history.

POMONA COLLEGE  
Claremont, California,  
*April 15, 1917*



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## INTRODUCTION

In the month of December, 1916, the Danish Government solemnly transferred the sovereignty of the Danish West India Islands to the Government of the United States, and three months later the United States took possession of the islands of St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix. From one point of view, this was the natural development of the United States as a West India power. The island of St. Thomas closely approaches the island of Porto Rico, the first island of the Caribbean Sea of which the United States became possessor. All that will appear upon the map will be the extension of the American Government from Porto Rico a little to the southeast. From a strategical standpoint, the chief value of the Danish Islands to the United States is the possession of the harbor of St. Thomas; from an economic standpoint, it signifies a little further territory producing tropical fruits for the states of the eastern seaboard; from a political standpoint, it means another step in the expansion of the United States. But from the historian's outlook, it means the ending of the colonial power of Denmark, and thereby marks an epoch in history.

The history of the West India Islands has a particular significance to all students of the history of America. It was in the West Indies that took place the most bitter and prolonged struggle in American waters during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is generally pointed out, with a sniff of contempt, that through the lack of prophetic vision among the statesmen of the eighteenth century, it was proposed during the negotiations of the Treaty of Paris, in 1763, that the triumphant English Ministry should not take Canada from France, but one of the French West India Islands, so much more valuable did the commerce of the West Indies appear than the possession of Canada. It was in the West Indies that the most famous naval combats of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were fought, by the English against the Spanish in the seventeenth century, and by the English against the French in the eighteenth century. The struggle for the possession of the West Indies was, among the European nations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both political and economic. To use a phrase of Doctor Westergaard's, those were the days when "sugar was king." The importance of the sugar trade overcame all other considerations, and the European nation that could grow its own sugar cane and import its own sugar in its own ships had an immense commercial advantage over other countries. The peculiar geographical formation of the West India Islands gave every one of the maritime nations of Europe a chance to grow its own sugar. The earliest of these nations in the West Indies, Spain, counted rather on other staples than sugar, and paid more attention to its

mainland possessions than to its island possessions. Great Britain, by its settlement of Barbados and St. Christopher and by its conquest of Jamaica, definitely started its career as a planter and importer of sugar, and the French, the Dutch, the Danes, and even the Courlanders followed the example. One of the most interesting experiments in this direction was that of Denmark.

Doctor Waldemar Westergaard, a scholar of Danish extraction, though born in the United States, undertook, some years ago, to study the history of the Danish West India Islands. His knowledge of the Danish language from his childhood caused him to study with great interest certain Danish West India documents of primary importance which had been collected for Mr. H. H. Bancroft of San Francisco, and which now form part of the Bancroft Library, in the possession of the University of California. In his study of these particular documents, Doctor Westergaard discovered that not even in the Danish language was there any reliable history of the Danish West Indies. He therefore resolved to go to Denmark, and there soon found that the Danish historians had neglected the history of their colonial possessions. He spent about a year working among the Danish Documents, and was thereby enabled to obtain first-hand information as to the history of the Danish West India Islands, and to write a history of the Danish settlements based principally upon primary authorities. This introduction is not intended to be mere laudation of Doctor Westergaard or an account of his researches, which are described sufficiently well in his bibliography. The originality and merits of his book can be seen by the most superficial reader. Still less is this introduction intended to be a review of his book; it will be rather an attempt to set forth the results of Doctor Westergaard's labors as bearing upon the general history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Students of American colonial history know well enough the importance of the chartered companies, through which was made possible the early English settlement of the Atlantic seaboard of the present United States of America. But these companies which dealt with the mainland settlements only exhibit on a small scale the general principles by which companies were chartered for trade and plantation, not only by the English Government, but by other European countries as well. Some day it may be possible to bring out the likeness and unlikeness between the conditions under which companies were chartered in Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Denmark. M. Pierre Bonnassieux, in his *Les Grandes Compagnies de Commerce*, has given the outlines of such a study, and other French writers have dealt with phases of the French East India Company in particular. More interesting, if it could be made accessible from the primary sources, would be the history, and especially the early history, of the Dutch companies. The story of the English companies before 1720 has been written by Mr. William R. Scott, but their later history is scattered about in many different books dealing with India and America.

On all of them is light thrown by Doctor Westergaard's elaborate study of the Danish company. In these modern days, an attempt is being made to revive the chartered-company idea in England, and the British North Borneo Company, under Sir Alfred Dent; the British East Africa Company under Sir William Mackinnon; the British South Africa Company under Cecil Rhodes; and the British West Africa Company, under Sir George Taubman-Goldie, have all of them been an adaptation of seventeenth-century ideas to nineteenth century conditions.

There have been two great principles of expansion and settlement of European nations in Asia, Africa, and America. The one, direct conquest and settlement by the governments of European nations, and the other the tapping of the financial resources of different countries through charters granted to companies of merchants who subscribed capital for settlement and trade beyond the seas, under the direct permission or license of their respective governments. Spain and Portugal were the two countries that believed in direct expansion under royal authority. In some ways, the Portuguese experiment is more interesting, especially in regard to trade, than the far larger Spanish development of empire. The Portuguese Government, after the discovery of the direct sea route to India by Vasco da Gama, kept in its own hands as a government the entire trade of Asia. It was the Portuguese king's agents who purchased the cargoes for Portuguese royal ships in India and Ceylon, in China and Japan and Malacca, in Persia and Arabia. These cargoes of Asiatic produce were brought to Lisbon in the king's ships, and the goods were then purchased by individual merchants out of the king's warehouses. It would be possible to dwell at length upon the direct action of the Spanish and Portuguese Governments in the work of expansion, settlement, and trade in Asia, Africa, and America, but the illustration of the Portuguese Government's control of the Asiatic trade will serve to point out the chief characteristics of government direction. Other countries, notably Great Britain and the Protestant Netherlands in the sixteenth century, and France and Denmark in the seventeenth century, did not, for the most part, work through direct governmental agency, but through chartered companies. The relation between these chartered companies and the governments of their respective countries is a matter of great interest, and much new light is thrown upon it by Doctor Westergaard's very careful presentation of the relation between the Danish West India Company and the Danish Government.

It so happened that Danish expansion into the West Indies took place at the time when the government of Denmark-Norway was entirely in the hands of the Crown. The Revolution of 1660 had put an end to any body of representatives in a legislature, and the Crown took entire charge of all matters of administration. In Denmark, therefore, there was none of that interference on the part of the legislature which marks the history, in particular, of the English East India Company, which never quite knew, in the seventeenth century, whether it was under the

Crown or under Parliament, while it knew very well in the eighteenth century that it must expect the interference of Parliament whenever an opportunity offered. The Danish Crown, therefore, played a considerable part in the history of the Danish Company, even more than that of the French Crown in the history of the various French companies. In France, as in the Protestant Netherlands, the main reliance of the respective chartered companies was upon the various mercantile corporations, or rather organizations of the business interests of France; while in England it was the individual merchants that rallied together to form the first holders of stock in the great plantation and commercial companies.

A point to be noticed is that the Danish Company was, at the same time, a plantation and a trading company. In the minds of the expansionists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was no great distinction made between trade and plantation, and all students of English history will remember the important functions of the Board of Trade and Plantations, whose administrative powers extended over the varied interests of English colonial expansion. Doctor Westergaard has clearly distinguished between plantation and trade, and has shown how different were the problems presented by each of them.

The staple product of the Danish West India plantations, as of the plantations in all the other islands, was sugar. Doctor Westergaard explains at length the character of the sugar plantations, the working of the manufacture of sugar, and the intensive cultivation of the sugar cane followed by the inevitable exhaustion of the soil. But the chief problem of the sugar planters was labor. At first, the Danish Company tried to make use of the dregs of the white population of Copenhagen. But these first Danish immigrants died off like flies. They were unable to withstand labor in the Tropics. This had also been discovered by the English in the seventeenth century and, indeed, by all European planters in the West Indies. The natives of the islands could not work, and the labor problem, therefore, produced the negro slave trade. This meant the establishment by Denmark, as well as by the other countries owning plantations, of barracoons, defended by forts, on the west coast of Africa, where negro slaves could be collected for transport to the West Indies. Very carefully has Doctor Westergaard described these establishments, and shown their importance to the prosperity of the Islands. Indeed, a careful study of his book and of his appendixes will show what some may think a disproportionate amount of space devoted to the slave trade. On the other hand, it must be borne in mind that the negro slave trade was one of the most important phases of commerce in the eighteenth century, and that the wise stockholder in a West India trading and plantation company would naturally endeavor to have the company import slaves for its own and the planters' use in company ships rather than to buy them at a big profit to slave traders of other countries.



Denmark is a very small country compared to Spain, France, and Great Britain, and yet shows in the history of her West India Islands, it is possible to say, many illustrations of the mistakes that ruined the more extensive experiments of other nations. This is not the proper place to describe Doctor Westergaard's treatment of individuals, although he has made quite a picture gallery of governors, factors, captains, chaplains, statesmen, and politicians. To some readers, his personal description of individuals will appeal more than any other feature, but to others the larger economic and political questions involved will seem of greater interest. One episode in particular might be here mentioned, the story of the Brandenburg Company. The Great Elector of Brandenburg is a figure to conjure with; from him started the larger growth of the House of Hohenzollern and its development into King of Prussia and German Emperor. Those who read the past in the light of the present have sometimes wondered that neither Brandenburg nor Prussia had its part in the great movement of colonial expansion. Close students of Hohenzollern history know that Frederick the Great of Prussia deliberately resolved not to make his state into a naval or colonial power, but comparatively few know that the attempt was made earlier, not in the direct fashion of sovereignty, but through an arrangement with the King of Denmark, in the West Indies. It seems curious, at the present time, to think of the Hohenzollern Prince, and one as famous as the Great Elector, making arrangements with Denmark for a West India sugar experiment. The story of the Brandenburgers has been dealt with at considerable length by Doctor Westergaard, and doubtless, to some readers, this will prove the most interesting new fact brought to their attention. We have to remember that Brandenburg was a poor country in the seventeenth century, and that it had not the capital or the means to develop a colonial power. We must remember also that it had no sea power, while Denmark-Norway was one of the great sea powers, on account of its extended coast line, its geographical position, and the efficiency of its sailors.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Danish West Indies passed through various stages of prosperity and failure, and were at times profitable to the Danish Crown and to the Danish people, and at other times a drain upon their resources. But the time at last came, in the nineteenth century, when there was no more profit to be made out of cane sugar, and the Danish Islands definitely declined. The abolition of the negro slave trade, the development of beet sugar, the building up of larger political and economic units, all played their part in decreasing the value of the Danish West Indies either to Denmark or to the inhabitants themselves. The same depression from the same causes was to be seen in the West India possessions of other European countries. Ever since the abolition of negro slavery, the English West Indies have been profitless. But for pride, the Danes might have easily abandoned their West India possessions many years ago.

But pride in their past is pretty strong in small nationalities that have once been powers in the world. Denmark, after losing Norway in 1814, and Schleswig-Holstein in 1864, became a very small nation indeed, and the Danish West Indies rather a burden than anything else. Only one nation in the world desired the possession of the Danish West Indies, and that not for economic reasons. I think that it can be asserted that neither Great Britain nor France would have taken them as a gift, but the United States of America has, for more than a half century, desired the harbor of St. Thomas for strategic reasons. Porto Rico, acquired after the Spanish-American War in 1898, had no naval base, and when the Panama Canal was finally undertaken and then built, it became worth while for the United States to look again towards the acquisition of Thomas. The only argument against the cession of the Islands was historic pride, and in these days of European crisis, historic pride could not stand further against actual need. So the Danes made up their minds to forget that they had been a West India power, and to the great delight of the inhabitants of the Islands, who, as Doctor Westergaard points out, are generally not Danes, and to sell their West India possessions to the United States of America. It might be imagined that some patriotic Danes would feel deeply the loss of the Islands as signifying the passing of an historic relic of the Danish past, but the neglect which the Danish people have shown for the history of their West Indies, as shown in Doctor Westergaard's statement that no Danish scholar has written the history of the Islands, and that even the most valuable primary authorities have been utterly neglected, shows that the feeling of historic pride has not gone very deep among Danish scholars. At any rate, it should be noted as an interesting fact, that the first history of the Danish West Indies, written from primary sources, should be the work of the son of a Danish family which immigrated to North Dakota, and that he should have received his historical training at the University of California.

H. Morse Stephens

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