*The London West India Interest in the Eighteenth Century*¹

THE character of society in the West India Islands in the eighteenth century was, in some respects, very similar to that of Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas. Their trade was not competitive with that of the mother country; they had a staple product, sugar; their cultivation was carried on by slave labour. But between the society of the West India Islands and that of the southern colonies of North America there were two principal differences: in the West India Islands there was greater disproportion between the negro and the white populations, and amongst the proprietors of the plantations absenteeism was far more rife. These differences made the protection given by the mother country essential to the islands, as preventing not only foreign aggression, but also rebellion at home. The prevalence of absenteeism had also another result. The absentees formed at home a wealthy and influential body of men. In the London West India organizations of the eighteenth century they were an element which can have existed only to a very small degree in the societies connected with the North American colonies. The amalgamation of the West India planters in England with the London merchants trading to the West Indies

¹ The main authority for this article is a collection of minute books in the possession of the West India Committee (15 Seething Lane, E.C.). These are in two series and are dated as follows:

(a) West India Committee, Minutes, West India Merchants: vol. i, April 1769–April 1779; vol. ii, June 1779–August 1783; vol. iv, August 1794–December 1802. These are the minute books of the Society of West India Merchants, founded c. 1750 and continuing to 1843. They are referred to in the foot-notes as *Merchants' Minutes*.

(b) West India Committee, Minutes: vol. i, May 1785–December 1792; vol. ii, February 1793–April 1801. These are the minute books of the standing committee of West India planters and merchants, founded c. 1782 and continuing to the present day. They are referred to in the foot-notes as *Standing Committee's Minutes*.

Information has also been obtained from the records of a firm of West India merchants trading to Barbados, Messrs. Wilkinson and Gaviller (34 Great Tower Street, E.C.). These records comprise entry books of outgoing letters and account books; they commence in 1739/40 and are almost complete for the remainder of the eighteenth century. The firm is referred to in the foot-notes as Messrs. *Laocelles* and Maxwell, the name used in 1739/40.

gave to the society which they formed a strength that enabled it to exert an influence over British politics far greater than that of its contemporaries. And that society has had a continuous life to the present day, through all the economic and political changes through which the West India colonies have passed.

Certain definite results can be traced to this influence in the eighteenth century. Professor Pitman¹ has indicated its importance in the cases of the Molasses Act of 1733² and the Sugar Act of 1739,³ and it was seen again in 1764 when the policy of the act of 1733 was further developed.⁴ Yet, if these acts could have been enforced, the result to the prosperity of the New England colonies would have been serious. With the same object in view—the maintenance of the prosperity of the sugar plantations by increasing the demand for British sugar—opposition, by this time no longer uniformly successful, was organized to Pitt's Irish resolutions of 1786,⁵ to the founding of a British company for trading at Sierra Leone in 1791,⁶ and to the introduction of East India sugar in 1792.⁷ Two other important objects of the West India interest can be traced in the eighteenth century. In time of war, constant representation to ministers of the danger to the islands, the necessity for increased squadrons and for convoys for the trade, had at any rate a considerable part in saving the islands from foreign conquest. And in the latter years of the century from 1788 onwards the whole force of the West India interest was employed to oppose the attacks then made on the slave-trade.⁸

Of this West India interest there were, as has already been indicated, two main sections, the planters resident in England and the London merchants trading to the islands. A third element must be mentioned, connected sometimes with one or the other of these two, that is the colonial agents. The first colonial agent⁹ of any West India island appears to have belonged to Barbados. The history of his appointment is

¹ *The British West Indies*, pp. 254–63, 181–3, 187.

² 6 Geo. II, cap. 13.

³ 12 Geo. II, cap. 30.

⁴ 4 Geo. III, cap. 15.

⁵ Chatham Papers, 352 (Public Record Office), Resolutions of West India Planters and Merchants, 24, 26 February, 9 March, 22 April, 6 May 1785. Also Standing Committee's Minutes, vol. i, 18, 31 May, 7, 14 June 1785. See also Holland Rose, *William Pitt and the National Revival*, pp. 255, 260.

⁶ Standing Committee's Minutes, vol. i, 11, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23 May 1791.

⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. i, 14, 20, 24, 28 February, 9–12 March, 17, 19, 20, 22, 31 March 1792.

⁸ A sub-committee was appointed at a meeting of 7 February 1788 to deal with this matter, and its sittings are recorded at various periods during the remainder of the century (Standing Committee's Minutes, vols. i and ii).

⁹ The term colonial agent has been used in its strict sense to indicate the representative resident in England of the planters and merchants of the islands: in most cases the appointment of an agent of the governor can be traced earlier.

interesting.¹ Already in 1670 there were a considerable number of gentlemen planters of that island resident in England, and certain of these wrote a letter to the deputy-governor, council, and assembly in December of that year giving an account of some matters in which they had been acting in the interest of the island and suggesting that an agent should be appointed.² They recommended that the assembly should

allow a Salary to a person of some quality who shall constantly attend the general Councelle and from time to time give notice to us what is in agitation Relating to Barbados and with our Advice draw up and prepare such things as are necessary, keepe a Register of the Orders drawne upon your treasury for money, and from time to time Remitt Coppys of them to you.

The assembly took the advice, and in April 1671 a letter addressed to the gentlemen planters stated that an agent had been appointed. The first reference to an agent for Jamaica that has been found is dated January 1676/7,³ and even then his position is not clear, for it was not until 1682 that the custom of 'raising money for soliciting the affairs of this his majesty's island in England' commenced.⁴ For the Leeward Islands the first trace of the agency appears in the year 1677.⁵

The gentlemen planters of Barbados in 1670 said that they advised that the agent should be some one whose interests were in Barbados: and this principle was fairly consistently followed for all the islands. The fact that the agent was so often an absentee planter or a merchant made the consultation by him

¹ The record of the correspondence here quoted is given in the Journals of the Assembly of Barbados, Colonial Office Papers 31 (2, 7 March 1670/1 and 20 April 1671).

² Voluntary action by planters and merchants in London appears in the cases of all the islands to have preceded the appointment of a paid agent. See Act appointing Commissioners and an Agent to Negotiate . . . the Affairs of the Leeward Islands . . . 8 Nov. 1690, Plantation Book, i (1677-1700), 163-5; also Colonial Office Papers 391 (1, 13 January 1675). See also Edward Long, *History of Jamaica* (London, 1774), i, 135-6. It is interesting to note that the merchants and planters of Jamaica in London appear to have suggested in the first instance the instruction to the governor of Jamaica to consent to the raising of money to pay the expenses of soliciting the affairs of the island in England (Colonial Office Papers 391 (3, 16 December 1680)).

³ Colonial Office Papers 391 (1, 31 January 1676/7). Sir John Griffith is the agent referred to.

⁴ *Journal of the Assembly of Jamaica*; Colonial Office Papers 140 (2, 34 Car. II, 4 October 1682).

⁵ Colonial Office Papers 391 (2, 10 May 1677). An account of the negotiations resulting in the appointment of an early agent is given in J. C. Jeaffreson, *A Young Squire of the Seventeenth Century*, London, 1878. The book is compiled from a letter-book of C. J. Jeaffreson, a planter of St. Christopher, who came to England in 1682 and acted as agent for the island. The practice of appointing agents for single members of the Leeward Island group became general later; for Antigua it begins in 1698 (Plantation Book, ii (1700-2), 13-14). C. J. Jeaffreson was later (in 1690) appointed one of five 'commissioners' for the Leeward Islands (Plantation Book, i (1677-1700), 163-t).

of other persons interested in the island a simple and natural matter. Thus in 1707 the lords commissioners for trade and plantations applied to the agents of Jamaica and others interested for their opinion as to the time and strength of the convoy for the Jamaica trade, and the answer was signed by the two agents (Sir Gilbert Heathcote and Bartholomew Gracedieu) and twenty-four other merchants trading to Jamaica.¹ Two years later the agents and other merchants submitted to the lords commissioners for trade and plantations a proposal for forming certain settlements in the island of Jamaica.² In 1737 it appears that the agents of the sugar islands were directed by the lords commissioners to consult the merchants interested on the subject of certain negotiations with the court of France.³ Other similar occasions could be cited throughout the century.

It does not appear probable that in the early years of the eighteenth century these agents and planters and merchants had any permanent organization. When necessity arose meetings were held so that joint action could be taken, but there was no continuity in their history. Before a permanent society could come into existence there were several interests which had to be reconciled one to another. There had to be harmony between the resident planters, whose representatives the agents were, and the absentees; and between the absentee planters and the merchants. There had, moreover, to be unanimity between those concerned in the various islands: no evidence has been found that the last point was the occasion of any difficulty.⁴

The only institution connected with the West India interest which is known to have been in existence at this time was the Jamaica Coffee House, in St. Michael's Alley, Cornhill, whose foundation dates probably from the last decade of the seventeenth century.⁵ Here the masters of ships engaged in the Jamaica and Guinea trade called to collect letters, and were to be seen by merchants or others at stated hours. To this coffee house letters were addressed to the agents and probably to other merchants and planters from their correspondents in Jamaica,⁶ and no

¹ Colonial Office Papers 138 (12, 13, 16 May 1707).

² *Ibid.* 30 May 1709.

³ Brit. Mus., Add. MS. 22676, fos. 122-5.

⁴ A possible source of difference is indicated in a letter-book of Messrs. Lascelles and Maxwell, 1752-4, letter dated 1 May 1753 to Thomas Stevenson & Sons: 'a Bill is ordered . . . for the better peopling and Cultivating the Lands of the Island of Jamaica, which the Ministry seems to have much at heart. If that can be compassed effectually, a plenty of sugar may hurt yours and the Leeward Islands in time. . . .'

⁵ *General Advertiser*, Tuesday, 18 December 1750. Notice headed 'To all Persons Concerned in the Jamaica Trade', where reference is made to the existence of the coffee house for sixty years past.

⁶ *Ibid.*, and Brit. Mus., Add. MS. 12431, fos. 116-17, 120-1.

doubt meetings were sometimes held here, to consult on the business of the island. But there is no indication that there was any regular organization for the transaction of affairs.

In the case of Jamaica, at any rate, there were serious difficulties in the way of a permanent organization. In the first place, the absentee planters and the merchants were far from being in agreement. There were occasions when, though they both took action on a matter, their influence was exerted in opposite directions. In 1709, when, as has already been mentioned, the merchants drew up proposals for settling certain people on the island, a counter-proposal was submitted by two persons 'on behalf of themselves and other planters'.¹ But we get the most authoritative statement on this point in 1725 from James Knight, an agent of Jamaica.² He writes from London to a correspondent in Jamaica an account of 'the method that the Virginians take, in managing their affairs, which are under the best regulation of any of the colonies'. The colony of Virginia had two paid agents

who constantly meet the planters and merchants twice a month, and consult with them what is proper to be done for the Service of the Country: they very Justly Consider their Interest the Same and dependant on each other, therefore go hand in hand, without any clashing or Jealousie: a Treasurer is Appointed to pay the Charges, and receive the Contribution of a C[harge] per hogshead on every hogshead imported.

The agent says that he does not think such a plan possible for Jamaica, owing to the 'Suspensions and Animosities, when the Gentlemen of our Island in England and the Merchants meet together'. He suggests that his correspondent may be able to think of some means for overcoming these difficulties, 'especially if the assembly have a greater regard to the trading Interest, which is most capable of serving the Island here'. Apparently it was some years before the expectation of James Knight was fulfilled. In 1745 we still find traces of antagonism between merchants and planters: this time the evidence comes from a merchant trading to Barbados,³ and he is speaking of the islands generally, so perhaps we may conclude that Jamaica was in no way peculiar in this respect. He complains that the planters in England, although they 'have certainly no authority from the People residing in the plantations to act as their representatives here . . . seem to assume it to themselves as

¹ Colonial Office Papers 138 (12, 2 and 3 August 1709).

² Brit. Mus., Add. MS. 22677, fos. 1-2. The letter is unsigned, but is the same hand as the following letter which is endorsed as being written by Mr. Knight. It is also referred to in the catalogue of Add. MSS. and more definitely in the index to the catalogue (1854-75) as by Mr. Knight.

³ Letter-book of Messrs. Lascelles and Maxwell, 1743-5.

a right'.¹ Yet more decisive is a reference of a group of planters in the same year to the 'many . . . Instances . . . where the Planting and Mercantile Interest Clash'.² No later trace has been found of this lack of harmony, and it probably disappeared soon after this date. There remained, nevertheless, the other great difficulty which delayed the growth of the West India society which we find later in the century—the disputes between the resident planters and the absentees. In 1750 there were numerous hearings before the lords commissioners for trade and plantations of the agent for Jamaica, John Sharpe, on behalf of the resident planters, and a certain Mr. Paris on behalf of the absentees. The point in dispute was the so-called Deficiency Acts passed by the legislature of the island; these required that a certain proportion should be maintained on every estate between the whites and the slaves, a fine being exacted as penalty; and where the owner of the plantation did not reside on the island a larger proportion of whites was prescribed. The absentees argued that the acts were contrary to an instruction issued to the governors of the islands in 1748. For a long time the matter was discussed, until finally in 1764 it was decided in favour of the absentees.

Although it is true, however, that these disputes had to be settled before the final form of organization could be developed, they did not prevent some degree of organization in earlier years, nor, as we have already seen, joint action by planters and merchants when occasion demanded. In 1733 and again in 1739 the West India interest secured strong support from parliament. Details are lacking as to the means by which these measures were obtained. We can trace, indeed, the petitions of the planters and merchants, the evidence given by them, and we know their final triumph: but at the manner in which the influence at the disposal of the petitioners was manipulated we can only guess. Valuable assistance is afforded by evidence relating to the years 1740 to 1745.

At some time previous to 1740 there came into existence the Planters' Club. William Beckford, writing to James Knight from Spanish Town on 11 October 1740, says:

I am glad to find our Club at Lebechs continues. It is very proper that a Number of Gentlemen should meet together in order to consult on Everything that shall be thought of for the good of their Country; ³

and again, ten months later, 'I am glad to hear our Club still

¹ Letter-book of Messrs. Lascelles and Maxwell, 1743-5, p. 249, letter dated 2 March 1744/5 to John Fairchild.

² Colonial Office Papers 177 (6, 16 October 1745).

³ Brit. Mus., Add. MS. 12431, fos. 116, 117.

subsists'.¹ That this is the institution generally referred to as the Planters' Club is confirmed by the account given of its origin by the club itself in a letter received by the council of Montserrat in 1745 :

The sugar planters that Reside in England being Desirous to promote the Interest of the Sugar Colony's in every Branch of it, as far as Lay in their Power ; and to put a stop to many abuses that had Crept into the Sugar Trade, thought that the first step to be taken for promoting these ends, wou'd be, for the Gentlemen belonging to the several Islands, to Unite into one Body ; and Accordingly they did some Years ago, form themselves into a Society in London, which takes the Name of the Planters Club.²

The letter was signed by twenty-eight persons, amongst them William Beckford and James Knight.³

The Planters' Club was probably at this time the only permanent organization of the West India interest in existence. But in the year 1743/4, only a few years after the great triumphs of 1733 and 1739, we have a detailed account⁴ of the method taken by the planters and merchants to attain their ends, and it is clear that the Planters' Club, although it joined in the business, was by no means the predominant element. The leaders were John Sharpe, the agent for Jamaica and Barbados, and Samuel Martin, the agent for several of the Leeward Islands. The incident to which the description relates is well known :⁵ Pelham proposed to place an additional duty of 2s. 6d. per cwt. on all sugar imported, and on 13 March a motion to this effect was introduced into the committee of supplies. Long before this the duty had been 'much talked of'. William Beckford wrote to James Knight from Spanish Town on 18 June 1743, 'should the parliament propose laying an additional Duty of 2/4d. [sic] per cent. [sic] on sugar Adieu to all new settlements'.⁶ Six months later the danger had become urgent and vigorous measures were taken to withstand it. The merchant trading to Barbados, whom we have already quoted, describes what these were. First, a case was drawn up showing the grounds on which the tax was opposed, and the agents presented it to Mr. Pelham.

¹ *Ibid.*, fos. 120-1.

² Minutes of Council of Montserrat, Colonial Office Papers 177 (5, 16 October 1745). The club was supported by voluntary subscriptions.

³ See also *Journals of Assembly of Jamaica*; Colonial Office Papers 140 (33, 21 Geo. II, 16 April 1747), where the agent is directed to consult certain members of the Planters' Club, including Beckford and Knight. Further references to the club exist in Colonial Office Papers 177 (5, 28 August 1745; and 9, 20, 13 February 1748/9).

⁴ Letter-book of Messrs. Lascelles and Maxwell, 1743-5.

⁵ See Pitman, *The British West Indies*, pp. 187-8, n. 67.

⁶ Brit. Mus., Add. MS. 12431, fos. 125, 126. Cf. letter published in the *London Evening Post*, Thursday, 16 February to Saturday, 18 February 1744, under same date.

He said, he would carry it with him into the Country, where he was going during the Holy Days, and read it; but whatever his own sentiments might be, the rest of the ministry were of opinion that an additional Duty upon sugar, would be born by the Consumers, and it was resolved therefore to bring a Bill for that purpose into the house, the case was then published. . . . The printed case has been sent to the respective house of every Member of Parliament in Town. The Agents, Planters and Merchants, have also agreed and divided themselves into several small parties to attend upon the several Members, and many of them have already been addressed upon the Subject and every one of them will be solicited personally, before the Bill comes into the House, All people that have any Interest with such as have Influence with Members are also Courted, and People in general seem to think as we do, in opposition to the Bill. Copies of the case have also been dispersed to the several sea ports of the Kingdom, besides publishing it in the Evening Post, and nothing shall be wanted to make the clamour popular, and if possible to get this d—d Bill as much abhorred as the Excise Scheme.¹

In another letter of the same date, 17 January 1743/4, the merchant states that 'there have been for some weeks passed frequent meetings of the Agents, Planters and Factors, interested in the Sugar Colonies'. One of the partners of this firm of merchants was a member of a 'Committee' which went round to visit the members of parliament at their houses. A letter describes their experiences:

Our George Maxwell with three more, had the City Members in their beat this morning, and really some of them are odd people, but they were all of our side, but not to be much regarded, as they are of the Minority that oppose the Court. We found a d—lish staunch Man for us, whom Mr. Knight used to call by the name of forty-one Heathcott, but that Man would have been of our side without any regard to the merit of our Cause merely to gratify his own natural propensity to opposition.²

The next day

George Maxwell with the same three deputies had the Quarters of 30 and odd Members to beat up. . . . The Courtiers were extremely civil, and said they had read our Pamphlet, which they thought well wrote, but as they were not versed in the knowledge of Trade, they must suspend their opinion till our arguments came to be debated in Parliament, and they assured us they had great tenderness for Trade, and especially for that of the Sugar Colonies.³

Among the members visited were two of especial interest, Dodington, of whom we learn that 'he wants as much to be a Courtier again as any one, and was they say refused, absolutely by the King to be taken in upon the last Change, because he had

¹ Letter-book of Messrs. Lascelles and Maxwell, 1743-5, pp. 82-3, letter dated 17 January 1743/4 to General Applewhaite.

² *Ibid.*, p. 85, letter dated 17 January 1743/4 to James Bruce.

³ *Ibid.*

treated Lord of Orford with the utmost ingratitude';¹ and Admiral Vernon, who said he would support the tax; he knew that 'the Duty would fall upon the Planter', but 'they would otherwise be for raising money by a Tax upon the People here, which would effect [*sic*] himself, and concluded that his shirt was near him, but his skin was nearer'.² He 'is not heard of scarcely, but in the house of commons, where he is a frequent but a very bad speaker, and there they will hardly bear to hear him, although he makes a noise, and declares he will be heard, and the house grows thin as soon as he begins'.³

After all these efforts the planters and merchants were not at all certain of victory. They secured the support of William Pitt, 'the leading Member of the Opposition', and drew up a brief for him to speak against the tax. Further, they obtained a promise of help from the Scottish and Irish members. The latter were gained by an undertaking, given apparently by the gentlemen of the Planters' Club, to support in return a tax on foreign linens which would serve to protect the Scotch and Irish linen industries.⁴ The combination of interests was successful: the motion was carried against the ministry. The picture is clear: the merchants and planters divided into groups 'beating up' the residential parts of the city; their well-written case, with, as some one comments, more assertion than argument, the ministerial party professing to be unable to understand it until they have heard the debates in the house; their difficulties in the face of the intrigues of Dodington and the vociferous declamation of Admiral Vernon. But this is not all. The organization was merely temporary: the time was not yet come when the old jealousies were laid aside, and a permanent society could be formed including both planters and merchants.

Fifteen years later, the first definite trace appears of an organization of the West India interest other than the Planters' Club. This organization was generally known as the Society of West India Merchants, a title that suggests analogy to the Society of London Merchants trading to Virginia and Maryland which seems to have developed at about the same time.⁵ The

¹ *Ibid.* See also *Walpole Letters*, ed. Toynbee (Oxford, 1903-5), i. 154, n. 6, 165, 188-9.

² Letter-book of Lascelles and Maxwell, 1743-5, p. 119, letter dated 12 February 1743/4 to George Hannay.

³ *Ibid.* The letter continues: 'He uses many expressions peculiar to himself. He says Cardinal Fleury was an old Jesuitical son of a — . . . that no Nation this side H—l is so much in Debt as this Nation, and was himself a single Man he would leave it and go to new England, which he calls the Land of Canaan, and he foresees this country will be ruined very soon by exorbitant Taxes.'

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95, letter dated 17 January 1743/4 to John Fairchild; and p. 249, letter dated 2 March 1744/5 to John Fairchild.

⁵ Reference to this society is made in the Chatham Papers, 95. See also Merchants' Minutes, vol. i, meeting of 4 July 1769.

first reference that has been found relates to the year 1760.¹ Under that date there is a letter among the Newcastle Papers in the British Museum in which it is stated that 'The Agents of the Colonies and the West India Merchants' wished to be permitted to wait on the duke of Newcastle with a memorial. The letter is signed 'Beeston Long, Chairman of the West India Merchants'.² Six years later the West India merchants invited the duke of Newcastle to a dinner, and a letter on the subject has been preserved from the duke of Newcastle to Mr. Long.³ These letters could not perhaps be taken as proof of the existence of a permanent and organized society of the West India interest if it were not that from 1769 onwards there have been preserved the minutes of its meetings. These are now in the possession of the direct descendant of the society—the West India Committee.

The first entry in the minute books is under date 11 April 1769. By that time it is evident that the society has been in activity sufficiently long for its constitution to be taken as a matter of course. All our conclusions as to the form of the society have to be deduced from a study of the business transacted, the methods by which the society worked, and the information given as to the persons present at the meetings. It is characteristic of the whole development of the organized West India interest that there is no trace throughout the eighteenth century of any rules other than those of custom: in 1829 and again in 1843 there were constitutional reforms, but these are the earliest on record. Nevertheless, we can get from the minutes a tolerably clear and detailed account of the nature of the society. The meetings were held normally once a month, but departures from this practice appear to have been frequent. There was no regular locality for the meetings, a room at the office of the Marine Society⁴ being the most usual meeting-place. The exact basis of membership of the society is difficult to determine; probably there was no definite system of admission until the last ten years of the century.⁵ By 1792 it had become usual for the names of new members to be proposed and seconded by existing members at a meeting of the society, and then after the lapse

¹ It is possible that the society had been in existence since 1746 or earlier, and that only its political activities are new in 1760; see below, p. 383, n. 5.

² Brit. Mus., Add. MS. 32902, fo. 458.

³ Brit. Mus., Add. MS. 32975, fos. 416, 430. See also letter from Stephen Fuller, agent for Jamaica, Add. MS. 32975, fo. 400.

⁴ A charitable organization for ministering to the widows and orphans of seamen: it was established in 1756; its present office is Clark's Place, Bishopsgate.

⁵ At a meeting of 2 April 1771 it was resolved that 'the question of the admission of members to this meeting' should be considered next month, but when the time came the matter was postponed (Merchants' Minutes, vol. i, meetings of 2 April and 7 May 1771).

of a few weeks the new members were declared to be admitted. The title of the society indicates that the membership was confined to merchants. No doubt this was so, but it is very difficult to make any further decision as to the scope of the membership. A consideration of their own interests would probably, however, lead all the prominent merchants to attend the meetings. The attendance varied considerably; there were six or eight members in the early years of the society who were usually present, and there were also a very large number who attended more rarely, some very seldom indeed.

From the rule that all members of the society should be merchants even the colonial agents do not appear to have been exempt. One of the most constant attendants at the meetings was Stephen Fuller, the agent for Jamaica, and Richard Maitland, agent for Grenada, St. Vincent, and Tobago,¹ was also a member; but the agent for Barbados, George Walker, does not appear.² Stephen Fuller and Richard Maitland we know to have been merchants, and George Walker was an absentee planter, so it seems safe to assume that the agents were admitted as merchants and not in virtue of their agency. Nevertheless, the merchants who were also agents had a very prominent place in the society, and matters were frequently referred to them on the ground of their position as agents.³

The chairman of the society, in its early years, was, as has already been indicated, Mr. Beeston Long, of the firm Long, Drake and Long. There was a paid secretary, James Allen, without whose signature, it is stated in the minutes of the year 1776, no advertisement by the society should be taken as authentic.⁴ The treasurer was a member of the society, Mr. Samuel Long, of the same family and firm as the chairman. The fund of which Mr. Samuel Long was treasurer gives a most valuable indication of the nature of the society. It was not merely a group of traders combined to further their own interests and to regulate the conditions of their trade: it was not merely the counterpart for the merchants of the Planters' Club. It shows a definite advance towards the fusion of interests that resulted in the formation of the West India Committee. The origin of the fund was the charge on trade,⁵ an imposition similar

¹ Tobago after 1772.

² George Walker and his successor Samuel Estwick appear later when there are joint meetings of planters and merchants.

³ e.g. in 1770, when the agent for Jamaica had submitted to him a petition relating to exorbitant fees said to be exacted at Savannah-la-Mar (Merchants' Minutes, vol. i, meeting of 2 October 1770).

⁴ *Ibid.*, meeting of 2 April 1776.

⁵ The charge had been levied for some time; in the year 1746, 'to prosecute the Fellows called Lampers, when detected in stealing sugars on board' (Letter-book

to that which James Knight describes as having been paid by the Virginia interest in 1725.¹ It was a charge of, normally, 1d. per cask of sugar or puncheon of rum or 1,000 lb. of coffee and in proportion for other goods brought into the port of London from the West India Islands; there was also a charge of 1d. per ton on the shipping employed in the trade:² the merchants paid it to the treasurer of the society. In the year 1777 it was stated that some gentlemen had omitted to pay it, and the secretary was directed to write to them impressing upon them the necessity for contributing their share of this 'the sole fund' of the society.³ But though the merchants paid the charge it was the planters on whom the main burden of it ultimately fell. The merchants in all their transactions acted as the factors of the planters.⁴ The sugar, &c., was shipped to the merchants at London, and they shipped back to the planters the goods required on the plantations; they sold the sugar and other goods at the best price they could get and sent accounts of sales to the planters, showing the various charges to which they had been subject and the net proceeds of the sales and how far these were exhausted in the value of the goods exported. And in these accounts of sales one item was 'pierage, primage and trade',⁵ the last the import charge to which reference has been made.

of Messrs. Lascelles and Maxwell, 1745-8, letter dated 14 June 1746 to John Frere). A year earlier the Planters' Club stated that they had thought their expenses might be paid from 'the Old Fund of One penny per Hogshead' levied 'whenever it was called for'. They had abandoned the plan because in their care for the general interests of the islands they were sometimes at variance with the merchants: Colonial Office Papers 177 (5, 16 October 1745). Possibly before this time the charge was collected only on such occasions as the Sugar Act agitation, although for this some at any rate of the cost was paid by the islands through their agents. The Planters' Club in 1745 concerned themselves with the prevention of plunderage, and this suggests that the charge was paid to them in 1746; but their statement in 1745 seems to preclude this view: possibly the merchants had some form of association of which traces have not been found. Cf. the evidence of James Allen in 1796 before the committee appointed in that year on the trade and shipping of the port of London (*Reports of Commissioners: Port of London*, 1796, pp. 170-1). The West India Merchants raised a fund 'to defray the Expence of Prosecutions for Thefts committed on the River, and on the Quays, of West India Produce': and employed two constables on the quays to detect thieves.

¹ See above, p. 377.

² There are very few references to this charge on shipping in the extant minutes. The only references are: Merchants' Minutes, vol. i, meeting of 7 July 1778; *ibid.*, vol. iii, meeting of 23 May 1797; *ibid.*, meeting of 22 May 1799.

³ Merchants' Minutes, vol. i, meeting of 6 May 1777.

⁴ This was stated categorically by the merchants in a document drawn up by them in 1799 on the occasion of the loan made to them by the Bank of England (Minute Book of Committee appointed by a Meeting of the West India Merchants, 3 October 1799, meeting of 15 November 1799).

⁵ The accounts of sales from which I have taken this information relate to the early years of the nineteenth century. There is a volume headed 'Barbadoes, Accounts, &c.' belonging to Messrs. Lascelles and Maxwell, which gives an example of an account of sales in 1806.

We have other evidence that the import charge was paid by the planters. In 1788 the anxiety caused by the attack on the slave-trade resulted in great activity on the part of the West India interest in London. It was found that the income resulting from the normal charge was not sufficient, and it was decided in 1789 to increase the rate from 1*d.* to 6*d.* and later to 1*s.*¹ From 1792 to 1796 there were annual meetings to determine the amount of the charge; these annual meetings were of planters only, the merchants who paid but did not bear the brunt of the levy were not consulted. Further evidence still is afforded by negotiations carried on at this time with the out-ports. It was decided by the London organization² that application should be made to the societies at Liverpool, Lancaster, Glasgow, and Bristol for contributions to the expense of opposing interference with the slave-trade, and the contributions were to be obtained by a charge on imports. The merchants and planters of Glasgow objected; of Liverpool the most that can be said is that they were lukewarm, and, apparently, the attempt was dropped.³ In 1799 it was directed that a request should be made to the planters whose goods were sent to the out-ports to pay the charge due to Mr. Long.⁴ There can be no doubt that the only function of the merchants in connexion with the import charge was its payment to the treasurer.

As to the charge on shipping nothing very definite can be said. There is no reference of any increase in the charge until 1797, when it is raised to twopence.⁵ The increase on this occasion was voted at a meeting of merchants, and not at the annual meetings of planters at which alterations in the rate of the charge on imports were made, and it may probably be inferred that the charge on shipping was paid by the merchants.⁶

It must be noted in connexion with the charge, that there

¹ Standing Committee's Minutes, vol. i, meetings of 24 April 1789 and 16 May 1792.

² *Ibid.*, meeting of 16 May 1792, and *ibid.*, vol. ii, meeting of 1 June 1793.

³ In Bristol the charge was levied for a time. It was decided at a meeting held at the Merchants' Hall on 3 June 1789 that a charge of 6*d.* per hogshead should be collected. This appears from a minute book now in the possession of the Society of Merchant Venturers, Merchants' Hall, Bristol. No evidence has been found as to the length of time for which the charge continued to be levied. The ordinary expenses of the Bristol West India Club (as re-established in 1782) were paid from an annual subscription of 5 guineas from each member.

⁴ Standing Committee's Minutes, vol. ii, meeting of 20 May 1794.

⁵ Merchants' Minutes, vol. iv, meeting of 23 May 1797.

⁶ The only other class by which this charge could have been paid is the owners of vessels. There is the less likelihood of this, however, since there was a 'Society of Owners and Masters of Ships belonging to the Port of London, Associated for the Protection of Shipping of the said Port', consisting in 1785 of 'upwards of One hundred and Seventy Members' (*Journals of the House of Commons*, 25 Geo. III, 30 May 1785, xl. 1033).

was no absolutely impassable line between planters and merchants and shipowners. Sometimes, possibly frequently, the merchants were also owners of vessels employed in the trade, and sometimes, probably not very often, they were planters. It seems likely, however, that this double interest in the West Indies was less common in the eighteenth century than it was later. At any rate, it does not appear to have been sufficiently usual in the eighteenth century to account for the fact that a fund to which the planters were the main contributors was administered by a society of merchants. The explanation lies, more probably, in the fact already stated that the merchants acted in business and private affairs¹ as the representatives of the planters, and therefore it was regarded as natural that they should act as their representatives in the use of this fund. The main point at issue between the resident and the absentee planters—the Deficiency Laws—had been settled in 1764; the quarrels between the merchants and the absentees had disappeared. It was possible, therefore, for the Society of West India Merchants to act as the executive of the whole West India interest.

A consideration of the business undertaken by the society leads to the same conclusion. To a certain extent the meetings were taken up with matters of trade; they fixed the rates of freight outwards to the colonies, they concerned themselves in the prosecution of thieves on the wharves; later in the century they played a very prominent part in the institution of the marine police office.² But these were not their sole functions. In these early years they dealt with all kinds of business affecting the sugar colonies: for example, in 1770 they appointed a committee to promote the passing of the bill 'for the better enabling Aliens to recover Money lent in all His Majesty's Colonies in America':³ and frequently sums of money were subscribed for the sufferers from a fire or a hurricane in one of the islands, or for the printing of some pamphlet on a subject in which the colonies were interested. The Society of West India Merchants did not falsify its trust.

In 1769 the Planters' Club was still in existence. Probably, however, it was always more social than political in character, and now that the merchants had developed so strong an organization it fell gradually into insignificance. In 1771 it was reported at a meeting of the merchants that some of the merchants had

¹ The merchants played a prominent part in recommending planters with whom they were connected to be members of council in the islands or holders of offices there. This appears from the Letter-books of Messrs. Lascelles and Maxwell and also from the Colonial Office Papers, especially Colonial Office Papers 391 (Board of Trade Journal).

² Merchants' Minutes, vol. iv, meeting of 12 January 1798 *et seq.*

³ *Ibid.*, vol. i, meeting of 4 December 1770.

discussed a matter connected with the trade with a committee of the Planters' Club;¹ but this is the last reference that has been found. Within a few years of this the club either disappeared, or altered its character and name by the admission to its membership of merchants.² And in 1783 a notice was inserted in the press suggesting that planters should meet at a dinner to discuss the formation of a club, 'to consist of planters only'.³

For some years, then, the planters left the main share in the organization, by which the interests of the islands were promoted, to the merchants. Yet they were by no means idle. In the minute books of the merchants' society there are recorded, besides the monthly meetings of the merchants, and the meetings of committees appointed for some special purpose, certain general meetings of planters and merchants. These general meetings were apparently regarded as necessary when any alteration in the freight homewards from the islands was considered desirable; they met also when matters of particular interest or importance were afoot. There were other meetings of a similar character, which, for what reason we do not know, were not recorded in the minute books. An example of this occurred in the year 1775, when a series of meetings was held to consider what measures were necessary in view of the events that were taking place in North America. The history of these meetings is worth recording as illustrating the development of joint action by planters and merchants at this period.

At a meeting of the merchants on 3 January 1775, Mr. Long reported that he had received a letter from a number of 'Gentlemen of the West India Islands living in London' asking that the Society of West India Merchants would join with them in calling a general meeting of planters and merchants.⁴ The merchants agreed, and next month it was reported that several meetings had been held. A general meeting was advertised for 18 January at the London Tavern, Bishopsgate Street:⁵ and apparently a preliminary meeting was held on the 5th inst., when it was resolved that the London merchants and planters would join with the 'merchants, traders, &c., in the West India business, residing at Bristol' to concert what measures should be taken.⁶

¹ The nomenclature of all the societies dealt with is very varied. In the minutes of the merchants' society the same meeting is definitely referred to as having been requested by 'the British West India Society at the Thatched Tavern', and held with the committee of the Planters' Club (*ibid.*, meetings of 1 January and 5 February 1771). This looseness is indicative of their very gradual crystallization.

² In 1779 Admiral Keppel was invited to a dinner by 'the Society of West India Planters and Merchants' (*ibid.*, meeting of 23 February 1779).

³ *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, Thursday, 13 March 1783.

⁴ Merchants' Minutes, vol. i, meeting of 3 January 1775.

⁵ *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, Thursday, 5 January 1775.

⁶ *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, Friday, January 6, 1775. Statement

On the 18th the general meeting met, Mr. Beeston Long being the chairman : a committee was appointed to prepare a petition to the house of commons 'representing the alarming situation in which the West India islands are placed by the resolution of the congress, held at the city of Philadelphia in North America on the 5th of September 1774, and praying their interposition' : the committee was to report to another general meeting to be held on the 25th inst.¹ This meeting was held and the petition agreed to ; it was determined that Mr. Alderman Oliver should be requested to present it and that the committee before appointed should prepare evidence in its support. A third general meeting was held on 31 January, and this is noteworthy because it resolved that the committee should meet from day to day, adjourn as they thought fit, and call a general meeting when they considered it desirable.² On 6 February the power to summon a general meeting was exercised ; and a notice was inserted in the press that a general meeting was to take place the next day. The notice was signed by the members of the committee, eight in number ;³ five of them (including the chairman) were among the gentlemen planters who signed the request to the merchants asking for a general meeting ; a sixth, George Walker, we know to have been a planter and the agent for Barbados, and of the remaining two neither was an attendant at the meetings of the merchants' society. If it be true that these eight members were the whole committee, the absence of merchants is noticeable, and lends some colour to a letter which appeared in the *Gazetteer and Daily Advertiser* of 17 January, violently condemning the merchants for their subservient relations with the planters.⁴ It is, in any case, clear that it was far from being true at this time that the influence of the planters was overshadowed by that of the merchants.

No evidence has been found that the committee had anything but a temporary existence. When it again became necessary that general meetings should be held the matter proceeded very much on the same lines as before. In April 1778 two general meetings of planters and merchants took place, and at the second of these a committee of planters and merchants was appointed. On this occasion the chairman of the committee was Mr. Long, in whose house the committee met ; and several merchants were among the members.⁵

by Mr. Samuel Vaughan to 'American Merchants, assembled Wednesday at the King's Arms Tavern'.

¹ *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, Thursday, February 16, 1775.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Daily Advertiser*, Monday, 6 February 1775.

⁴ *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, Tuesday, 17 January 1775. Letter signed J. Muskie, addressed 'To the Merchants trading to, or interested in, our North American Colonies'.

⁵ Merchants' Minutes, vol. i, meetings of 28 April 1778 and 29 April 1778.

These committees appointed at general meetings¹ show the direction in which the development is tending. From the repeated general meetings and their committees gradually a permanent organization is being built up, its activities supplementary to and in no way superseding those of the merchants' society. In 1782 we get another step towards the final form of organization. In the minutes of the meeting of merchants of January of that year there is inserted the copy of a petition of the West India planters and merchants to the king; the first signature is that of 'Nathaniel Bayly, Chairman'. Hitherto the chair at general meetings has always been taken by Mr. Long; he is here superseded by Mr. Bayly, who was a gentleman planter. In June of the same year two more general meetings were held, and at neither of them was Mr. Long in the chair: at the earlier of the two the chairman was Richard Pennant; and from this time there does not seem to have been a general meeting at which Mr. Beeston Long presided, and whenever Mr. Pennant is present he is in the chair.

At one of these meetings of 1782, there is a reference to the standing committee of planters and merchants, appointed presumably at one of the previous meetings. During the years 1782 to 1784 this organization takes permanent shape, and we get thus the standing committee, with Mr. Pennant (created Baron Penrhyn in September 1783) as chairman.

It is impossible to give the exact date at which the standing committee became a definite permanent institution, for unfortunately no minutes have been preserved to the West India committee for the period August 1783 to May 1785.² Certain manuscripts among the Chatham Papers³ in the Public Record Office give evidence of the existence of a committee of West India planters and merchants in February and March 1784 and again in the same months of 1785. In March 1785 the names of the members of the committee are given; Lord Penrhyn was chairman, and Mr. Beeston Long one of the members. In April there was a meeting of 'the select committee', but there is no means of judging its relation to the former committee. The same term is applied to two meetings in May, after the minutes commence again, and then in June there was a meeting of the standing committee, henceforth the kernel of the association.

It is, as we have suggested, probable, though not certain,

¹ For the sake of clarity the term general meeting has been used to indicate a meeting of planters and merchants. In the minutes the term is used not only for this purpose, but in reference to ordinary meetings of merchants only or planters only as contrasted with committee meetings.

² See list of minute books, p. 373, n. 1.

³ Public Record Office, Chatham Papers, 352.

that the standing committee was appointed in the first place at a general meeting. Additions to it were, we know, made from time to time by general meetings. It had, therefore, no constitutional connexion with the meetings of the merchants' society, though many of the members did in fact belong to both. This is an interesting point. The merchants' society had been in existence for over twenty years; its members had been active in promoting general meetings, but it received no recognized position at the constitution of the standing committee.

The standing committee, if we can judge from the minutes that have been preserved, did not meet regularly, but rather as business required. The chairman continued for the rest of the century to be Lord Penrhyn, the secretary was, as for the merchants' meetings, James Allen, and the treasurer, Mr. Samuel Long. The fund appears to have been the same as that from which the expenses of the merchants' society were paid.

The minute book in which the meetings of the standing committee are recorded contain also general meetings of the planters and merchants. These could meet only by summons from Lord Penrhyn.¹ There are also the meetings of numerous sub-committees appointed by the standing committee to deal with matters of special interest; the most important were those formed to deal with the agitation respecting the slave-trade and the scheme, finally brought into operation, for the construction of wet docks for the exclusive use of the West India trade.

Enough has been said already to indicate that with the growth of the standing committee of planters and merchants—the predecessor of the present West India Committee—the meetings of the Society of West India Merchants did not cease. The business undertaken by their meetings lessened considerably in scope during the last decade of the century, gradually becoming more and more confined to the regulation of trade: but the organization, however, continued as before. On the death of Mr. Beeston Long early in 1785, he was succeeded as chairman by Sir Richard Neave, Bart., who had been for some time deputy chairman; and Mr. Beeston Long's son, another Beeston Long, became deputy, and in turn succeeded Sir Richard Neave as chairman. The treasurer was still Mr. Samuel Long, and the secretary James Allen, son of the former secretary of the same name. The only meetings recorded in the minute books of the merchants' society are the monthly meetings and meetings of

¹ The earliest evidence for this statement is in connexion with a meeting of 21 December 1792 (Standing Committee's Minutes, vol. i). General meetings had formerly, however, ever since the beginning of the minutes of the standing committee in May 1785, been summoned by Lord Penrhyn.

sub-committees appointed by them: general meetings are recorded in the books of the standing committee. The merchants' meeting continued to have its separate organization until 1843; it was resolved at a meeting of that year that the continuance of a separate society was no longer necessary, and that such of its members as were not already members of the standing committee should be transferred to that body. Its long continuance is an interesting example of survival: the disagreement between planters and merchants resulted in the existence of separate meetings for nearly a century after the disagreement had disappeared.

The position during the last twenty years of the eighteenth century was then briefly this: there was a joint organization of planters and merchants; there was a separate society of merchants only; there were occasional general meetings of planters alone for specific purposes. There were also throughout the eighteenth century occasional meetings of the planters and merchants interested in one island or group of islands only.¹ These are sometimes recorded in the minute books, but sometimes we get no indication of them from this source. Frequently they were called by the agents in connexion with some business of special importance which was being transacted with the government. Perhaps the most interesting of these cases was in 1783, when the planters, merchants, and others interested in the island of Tobago held meetings to consider what action should be taken in view of the proposed cession of the island to France by the treaty of Versailles. The earl of Shelburne had recommended the appointment of an agent by the planters and merchants to represent the interests of the island at the court of France;² the advice was taken and assurances were obtained from the French ministers that favourable treatment should be accorded to the British planters.

Thus from various sources grew up the West India Committee, a powerful influence on British politics. In its final form it appeared only during the last eighteen years of the century; but long before that its way had been prepared by the practice of holding meetings to draw up petitions to the government. For many years nothing more definite than these occasional meetings could be developed owing to divergency of interest and

¹ See Minutes of the Council of Jamaica, Colonial Office Papers 137 (32, 18 and 19 December 1760); Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica, Colonial Office Papers 140 (40, 12 Geo. III, 20 November 1771); Merchants' Minutes, vol. ii, meeting of 28 November 1781. For the earlier half of the century the only evidence is the petitions and representations of the planters and merchants interested in the islands, the most fruitful sources for which are the series Colonial Office Papers 391 (Board of Trade Journals) and the *Journals of the House of Commons*.

² *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 53, January-June 1783, pp. 173, 535.

differences of opinion, but gradually these obstacles were removed and a society grew up in many respects similar to that of the present day. Many changes have, indeed, taken place in its constitution, but none so great as to break the continuity of development from the time when Lord Penrhyn was chairman of the standing committee, and James Allen carried round his minute books to the London Tavern, or the Marine Society's office, or the King's Arms Tavern in Cornhill.

Among the societies formed in the eighteenth century by the unincorporated branches of commerce, the West India Committee alone has survived to the present day. The history of its development is therefore interesting as throwing light on the methods by which such societies attempted to secure their ends in English political circles. It does not in itself wholly explain the peculiar success that attended the activities of the West India interest; for this an investigation must be made of the membership of the West India organizations, and of the attendance recorded at general meetings, an investigation which would produce evidence to show the great strength in the house of commons commanded by those concerned in the West India Islands. There is, however, another interest that attaches to the narrative. Although in many ways the West India organizations, especially the Society of West India Merchants, were comparable to the numerous 'meetings or clubs . . . of the Turkey and Italian merchants, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the French . . .',¹ they had an importance shared only with 'the Virginia, the Carolina, New York, and New England merchants' in that they were connected with a group of British colonies, and an importance in which they had no rivals in that these colonies were not lost to Great Britain at the break-up of the old empire. The presence in London of the West India organizations ensured that the interests of the colonies should not be violated by the home government through lack of information: to make certain of this was primarily the function of the colonial agents, but a much smaller measure of success would have been attained had it not been for the assistance afforded by the other planters and merchants with their wide influence and constant communications from the leading inhabitants of the islands.

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¹ *The Universal Spectator and Weekly Journal*, Saturday, 10 August 1734.