Jamaica – The Settlers From Nevis

By S. A. G. Taylor

The scene as you approach the harbour of Port Morant, whether by land or by sea, is as beautiful as any in the island of Jamaica, and it is hard to realize that at this place three hundred years ago was enacted a grim tragedy, the tragedy of the settlers from Nevis. Little prominence has ever been given to the story of these people, who all said and done, were the first English settlers to come to this Island, as distinct from the soldiers in Venables' Army. In New England the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers is commemorated and in Australia the coming of the First Fleet to Botany Bay has not been forgotten, but here, no one has been at pains to keep alive their memory. Their graves are unmarked and their saga is unsung. A few place names and four crumbling stone towers are all that remain to remind us of them and of times that have long since passed.

The Spaniards had done little to colonise the Hato or Morante as they called the strip of land lying between the sea and the towering peaks of the Sierra de Bastidas and the few who lived there appear to have fled to the north coast or to have surrendered after the coming of the English.

When Cromwell heard of the capture of Jamaica he endeavoured to attract settlers to his newly won domain. He advised the people of New England, whom he declared had been driven from the land of their birth to a desert and barren wilderness, to remove themselves to a land of plenty!

He wrote to the Governors of the various West Indian Colonies and advocated a similar policy, but as these Islands had been brought to the brink of ruin by the loss of four thousand able-bodied men who had enlisted in Venables' Army, they did not look on this suggestion with much enthusiasm and did little to further it, all save the Governor of Nevis, Luke Stokes.

Luke Stokes was an elderly man, probably of humble origin. Writing to Sedgwick he said, "His highness underserved and unexpected favours he hath bin pleased to throw some of them up on myself wherein hee hath in some particulars declared his highness designe concerning Jamaica and made mee an instrument to declaree it to the people of this colloni; so likewise I have declared it to my adjacent neighbours, and caused his proclamations to bee published; and I find in this island the greater part of the Inhabitants, with their wives, children and servants, are willing and ready to accept his highness terms, laid down in his highness proclamation." He did more than this, he announced his intention of accompanying the colonists if ships were sent from Jamaica to carry them to their new home.

The reasons why the Port of Morant was selected by the Commissioner in Jamaica as the site of the new settlement are easy to guess. Vice Admiral Goodson declared that this part of the island was "healthful", possibly because no one lived there, and, as a result, there had been no deaths from sickness.

Unlike the arid plains around St. Jago de la Vega the rainfall is adequate and the soils are among the most fertile in Jamaica. Here too the settlers would not be troubled by the Spanish guerillas whose raids had proved so costly to the Army west of the old Capital.

Lastly, it was unsafe to allow the fine harbour of Morant to remain undefended, for if it was reoccupied by the Spaniards it might prove a serious threat to the new naval base at Cagway, as Port Royal was then called, for it lay to windward of it. Indeed, this course was later recommended by the Governor of Cuba. Towards the latter part of the year 1656 the fleet despatched by Goodson arrived at Nevis, that tiny island on the outer rim of the Caribbean, where the trade-wind forever blows, and clouds as white as snow shroud the crest of its lofty mountain. In all, sixteen hundred men, women and children embarked with Luke Stokes, who was accompanied by his wife and three sons, the eldest of whom was only fifteen. This was no exodus of wealthy planters or of adventurers in search of loot. Most of those that bade farewell, forever, to their island home and sailed into the sunset towards the promised land were humble folk who wrested their living from the soil.

Let us picture the scene that greeted the settlers as their ships dropped anchor in the calm waters of the Port of Morant towards the end of December. Rising from the sea at the head of the cove was a low hill with red cliffs. On either side of it were mangrove swamps, a tangled
mass of roots sprouting from the slime. Here and there, these were pierced by sluggish creeks shaded by trees whose branches met above them in a leafy arch. Behind were low, densely wooded hills, and in the background, swathed with dark forests which hid their secrets, the Sierras de Bastidas brooded ominously over the scene. This wilderness was the promised land to which they had come, a wilderness which could only be tamed by strong arms and stout hearts.

They landed their stores on the beach by the low hill. They pitched their tents and built rude huts as shelters till their first tasks had been completed. The landing place had to be improved and a storehouse built; the woods about the camp had to be cleared and the country around explored; lastly, each family would be eager to select the land that was to be theirs.

Hardly had they begun these tasks when it began to rain and it continued to do so for the next two weeks. Only those who had experienced them can appreciate the rigours of the rainy seasons in the Tropics. Rains that descend day and night in an unending, stupefying roar, beating down the branches of the trees and blotting out the scene with a wall of tumbling water. When they stop, the air is hot and steamy and is filled with the stench of rotting vegetables. These were the conditions that the settlers from Nevis experienced as they waited in their rude shelters for the weather to abate. Wet, cold and tormented by myriads of mosquitoes, to them it must have seemed that there was death in the dank miasmic air that they breathed.

The blow was not long delayed. By January many were sick. In February Luke Stokes and his wife were stricken and by the beginning of March twelve hundred of the colonists had followed him once more, this time to the grave.

Although weak and wracked with fevers the survivors continued their hard task. They cleared the woods, they planted their crops, and the fittest of them hunted wild hogs in the mountains.

Their efforts were rewarded when later in the year they reaped a harvest, so bountiful that it was almost beyond their strength to gather it. The threat of another famine was thus averted and it was in large measure due to them that England was able to maintain her hold on Jamaica.

As their numbers were now too few to ensure the defence of this side of the island, part of the Regiment that had come out with Brayne was sent to Morant where they built two forts at the entrance to the Harbour, later known as Fort Lynch and Fort William. These soldiers had been recruited partly from the veteran Regiments under Monck in Scotland, and partly from the garrison in Ireland, and it was said later that they were "the best men that had ever come to Jamaica".

There is little more to tell. In 1658 Doyley on his way to attack the Spaniards at Rio Nuevo put in to the Port and was hospitably entertained by the settlers for a week. Long mentions that by 1671 they were prosperous and had developed upwards of sixty settlements, but in 1694 a disaster occurred, which must have hastened the disappearance of the Yeoman Farmers as a class.

In May of that year a warning was received that the French in Haiti under Du Casse were planning an attack on Jamaica. The Governor, Sir William Beeston, realized that it would be impossible to successfully defend the east end of the island so he ordered the Militia Regiment and all the settlers, with such goods as they could carry away with them, to withdraw to the newly founded town of Kingston.

At that time there was only one road to the Precincts of St. David and St. Thomas and this ran along the sea shore at the foot of the cliffs near Cow Bay. He knew that if the French seized this defile—as is in fact, they later did—it would be impossible to reinforce the troops in the East End or to withdraw them. Furthermore, although the forts at the entrance to Port Morant might prevent ships entering the harbour it would be easy for the enemy to attack them from the rear. Therefore, in accordance with the Governor's orders, the guns at the forts were spiked, the shot buried, and the powder brought away.

On the 17th of June Du Casse landed, and during the next month he laid waste the countryside. He fired the cane fields, he burnt the sugar works, and dwellings, he slaughtered the cattle, he illtreated those whom he captured and he carried off everything of value and all the slaves on whom he could lay his hands. It was many years before the district recovered its former prosperity.
Little is known of the descendants of Luke Stokes. A heavy burden must have fallen on his eldest son who was only fifteen but then responsibilities had to be shouldered at an early age in those far off times. Goodson appealed to Cromwell on their behalf and mentioned that the old Governor's fortune had been greatly reduced by his removal to Jamaica, and it is said that the Protector granted one of them a Commission in a Regiment in one of the American colonies.

In Modyford's survey of the island in 1670, it is recorded that John Stokes owned 25 acres of land in St. Thomas and Jacob Stokes 640 in St. David, for which parish the latter was returned as a member of the Assembly in 1672. In the eighteenth century another Colonel Jacob Stokes, had a son whom he also named Jacob, and when the latter died, the male line became extinct.

Stokes Hall, the family seat, was probably built towards the end of the seventeenth century or early in the eighteenth. It was strongly fortified and was undoubtedly intended as a rallying place for the Militia in troublous times. When it was destroyed by fire in 1931 it was the oldest dwelling in the island, which, had been lived in continuously from the time it was built. The Great-House at Stokesfield belongs to a later period.

The names of some of the estates in the district such as Bowden, Wards River, Stanton, Stokes Hall, Stokesfield, Phillipsfield, Wheelersfield and Rolandsfield are probably those of the first owners and there is another name here about which it is interesting to speculate. Near Stokesfield there is a little stream known as the River Styx. Perhaps it is connected in some way with the burial place of the first settlers, if so, let us hope that the shades of the men and women from Nevis rest in peace in the world beyond its banks.