The Caribbean

The Caribbean Sea extends from Cuba to Venezuela and from Central America to the Windward Islands.It is 1,500 miles long and its greatest width is 700 miles.

The most important islands in the Caribbean are the Antilles which are divided into the Greater and the Lesser Antilles.

The Greater Antilles comprise Cuba, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and Jamaica.

The Lesser Antilles are divided into the Leeward and the Windward Islands.

The Leeward Islands belonging to Britain are Antigua, Montserrat, St. Kitts, Nevis and the British Virgin Islands.

The British Windward Islands include Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Grenada and the Grenadines.

Many Caribbean islands belonging to Britain, France or Holland do not form part of the Antilles. Trinidad-Tobago and Barbados are two such British colonies.

History

Less than 50 years after Christopher Columbus set foot on the new world, Spanish settlements sprang up on all the large islands as well as on most of the small islands in the Caribbean.

British, French, Dutch and Danish seamen soon moved into the region and many bloody battles were fought for the possession of these rich islands.

The first English settlement in the West Indies occurred in 1625 when the British established themselves in St. Kitts (St. Christopher). Barbados and Tobago. Other settlements followed until 1660 when Britain took possession of St. Lucia.

The original inhabitants of the West Indies have virtually disappeared. They were replaced by African slaves brought in by white men to work on their plantations. Descendants of these Africans now greatly outnumber all other races.

The slaves were emancipated by Britain on April 18, 1834, and became completely free four years later.

Economy

Until approximately 1800, the Caribbean was infested with French, Dutch and British pirates of the ilk of Edward Teach (Blackbeard) and Henry Morgan. Trade had to be carried on under armed protection.

The disappearance of the buccaneers, however, was not accompanied by a surge of trade but rather by a decline.

This condition was brought about by the abolition of slavery and by stiff competition from other territories in the production of sugar cane.

Even today the economy of the islands is mainly agricultural and depends almost entirely on export crops. Sugar is the most important of these. Cotton, tobacco, citrus fruits and potatoes are also produced. Rum is manufactured and exported. Oil and asphalt in Trinidad and bauxite in Jamaica are the only minerals of commercial significance.

Federation

Numerous racial and historic differences had to be ironed out before agreement on federation could be reached.

Nevertheless the delegates to the London conference linked the destinies of their islands on February 23, 1956, by signing an agreement outlining the administrative, judicial and economic powers of the new federation which is to have its first government and elected legislature by March, 1958.

The main purpose of federation is to give responsibility to the peoples of the islands by removing the limitations of the old colonial system and allowing them almost complete control over their own affairs.

Bermuda and the Bahamas are not included in the Caribbean Federation.

The British government will be responsible only for the defense of the federation and for its external relations.

Provision has been made for the mainland colonies of British Guiana in South America, British Honduras in Central America and the British Virgin Islands to join the federation later if they wish.

It is hoped that the new federation will eventually become a full-fledged member of the Commonwealth of Nations.