

Montserrat

When Hurricane Hugo ripped apart the small island of Montserrat, it wrote a sad chapter in the history of the Irish people. of the many destinations sought out by the sons and daughters of Ireland when they left their native shore, Montserrat was one of the most interesting.

Located among the small series of volcanic cones that make up the Leeward Islands, Montserrat became An English colony about 1633 when her governor, Anthony Brisket, a Wexford man, opened it as a place for Irish Catholics who had served out their time as indentured servants in the British West Indian islands and who had discovered that while the English welcomed them as laborers they were unwanted as neighbors. The Irish flocked to Montserrat and by 1680 outnumbered the English by two to one. There is evidence of a Catholic church on the island by about 1650 and a succession of Irish Catholic governors, most notably Sir William Stapleton, continued to favor their countrymen. By 1689, when the Catholic king of England, James II, was deposed by the Protestant, William III, it seemed that Montserrat would be given by her Irish majority to the French. As it turned out, the English fought heroically in the West Indies to preserve their colonies there.

Irish dominance in Montserrat had actually begun to decline, how- over, even before 1669. In the middle of the seventeenth century, sugar began to replace tobacco as the island's cash crop. Tobacco could be profitably cultivated on small farms but sugar required an initial heavy investment. Some Irishmen had the necessary means such as John Blake of Galway, but most of the sugar plantations belonged to Englishmen and most of the Irish were relegated to the steep, jungle covered slopes, where they practiced a subsistence agriculture. Sugar also meant slaves. Africans began to arrive in large numbers through the next century. There were about 1,000 slaves on the island in 1678, 3,500 in 1708 and nearly 9,000 in 1755. By 1800, they were the majority.

Montserrat, however, never became a typical English West Indian island, where African slaves vastly out numbered a handful of Whites and racial mixture hardly ever took place. In the eighteenth century, Montserrat had two oppressed races. The Penal Laws, intended to crush Catholic, Celtic Ireland, applied also to Montserrat. The Irish, already reduced to poverty, suffered political disenfranchisement and religious persecution. Many of the young men emigrated but enough remained to constitute a peasant class eking out a bare living on marginal land. It was perhaps natural that the Irish and Africans at the bottom of the social structure worked, drank and made love together. An Afro-Irish population came into existence, its growth disguised by the tendency of English officials to count people as "Negro" if

they had the slightest trace of African ancestry. We can glimpse the hidden reality when we find slaves named Bridget or Tom Kerwin and increasing reference to free "mulattos." In the eighteenth century, the sugar boom ended and fresh imports of Africans ceased to arrive in Montserrat. The process of Afro-Irish mixing therefore accelerated and each generation was more racially mixed than the one-before.

In the early nineteenth century, most of the Afro-Irish deserted the Catholic Church in favor of the Methodists, who had taken a leading position in the campaign to abolish slavery. Oddly enough, this island of less than 40 square miles and less than 15,000 inhabitants is divided into a Protestant North and a Catholic South but Montserrat has never experienced a hint of the sectarian violence that makes Irish history so painful to read.

In the 1830's, slavery was abolished and the laws against Catholics repealed but Montserrat's racial harmony, born of oppression, continued into a better, more democratic era. Unlike most other West Indian islands, where racial animosity is thick, questions of race and color are considered rude on Montserrat. Dressed in a darker skin than their cousins in the old country, the Montserratians are yet Irish. Their names are Irish, they speak with a brogue, they have a solid reputation for hospitality and in times of adversity they rely first on "ourselves alone." It is with good reason that they stamp the sign of a shamrock into a new arrival's passport.

Hugo was not the first hurricane to devastate Montserrat. She has suffered many similar catastrophes but Hugo was perhaps the most heartbreaking of all. A poor country at the best of times, Montserrat had finally begun to make measurable progress in raising her standard of living. As one of the island's officials put it, they had just about gotten into the age of electricity and are now back into the age of kerosene. What, if anything, their cousins in the rest of the world can or will do for them remains to be seen.

(Written by James P. Walsh & originally printed in 1989)

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