

# Burning Books and Destroying Peoples

## How the World Became Divided Between "Rich" and "Poor" Countries

BY BOB PETERSON

Imagine going on a trip to a new place, one that you and your friends have never been to before. When you get there it seems strange: different types of plants and animals, and fruits that you've never tasted, but which are delicious. The people you meet appear friendly, but dress differently and speak a language you don't understand. In the middle of their large city you find a building that holds thousands of books — proof that these people have a history of writing and education.

Needless to say, you can't read their books. So what do you do?

You burn all of their books, every single one that you can find.

While this story might sound ridiculous, that is exactly what happened when the Spanish

colonialists met the Mayan people in what is now Central America.

In 1562 Fray Diego de Landa ordered that all Mayan books be collected and burned. Landa wrote, "We found a large number of books and they contained nothing in which there was not to be seen superstition and lies of the devil, so we burned them all, which they [the Mayas] regretted to an amazing degree and which caused them much affliction." Not only the Mayas but also the Totonac, Mixtec, and other Indians of "high culture" had books. They were all burned. (See "1562: Conquistadores Destroy Native Libraries," p. 43)

The mass book burnings deprived all of us of the Mayan people's written history, and most of their written knowledge about mathematics and astronomy, two areas of science which they studied a great deal. Only three books remain, by mistake, and they are now in museums.

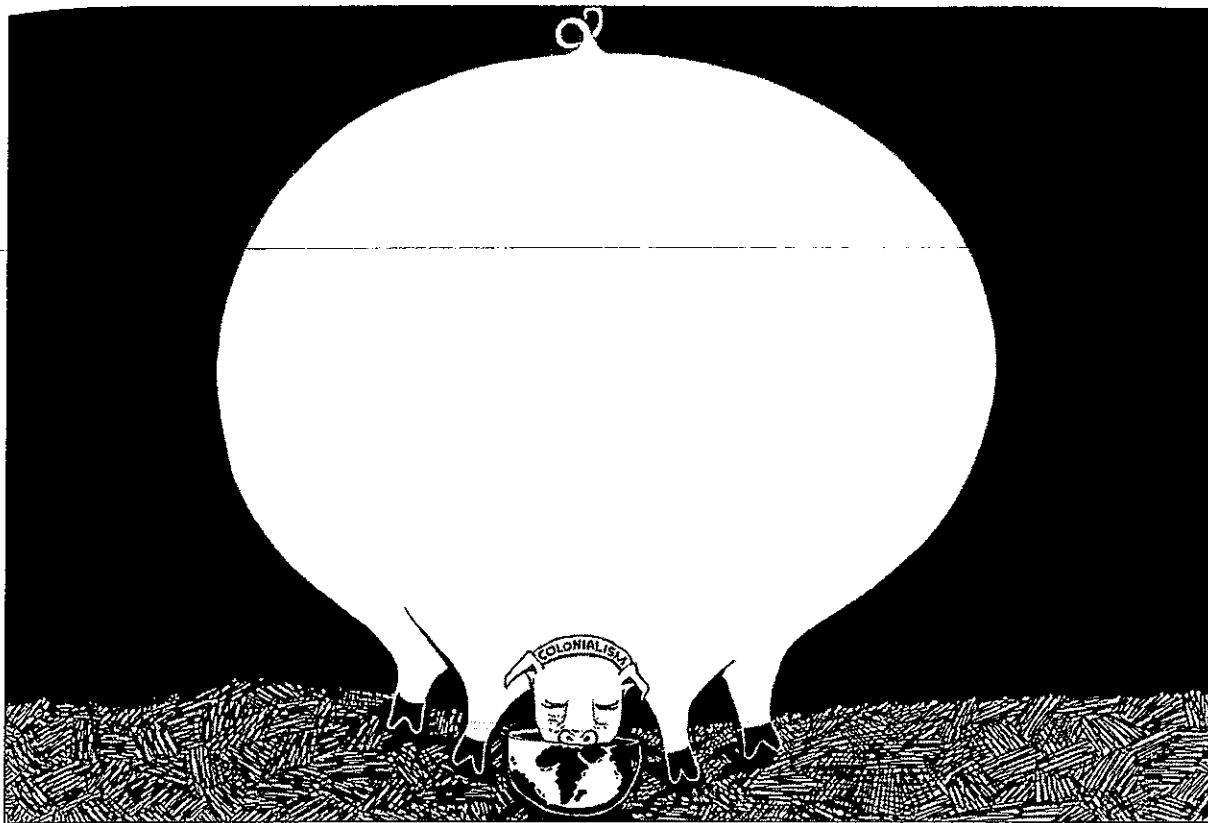
This is but one consequence of what colonialism meant for those who were colonized — the destruction of important parts of their cultures and the loss of their histories.

### PORTUGAL ATTACKS AFRICA

Colonialism is a system of control by a country over an area or people outside its borders. Modern colonialism started in the late 1400s, when those in power in a few European countries decided that they might become richer and more powerful by trading goods with people in other parts of the world. The rich people of Portugal, in an attempt to expand their country's trade with India and China, sent sailors on boats south along the Atlantic coast of Africa and then north into the Indian Ocean. The Portuguese traders found cities and peoples with a high level of education and culture. However, there was a problem: While the people of east Africa and India had lots of items like spices, porcelain, and ivory that the Portuguese wanted, the Portuguese didn't have much that the Africans and Asians wanted



Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture.



besides metal pots and pans — and guns (which the Portuguese weren't eager to supply to others).

The Portuguese solved this problem on future voyages. They took well-armed ships and soldiers and forced the Africans and Asians to "trade" with them. A Portuguese ship would arrive on the east coast of Africa armed with cannons, guns, and soldiers. The soldiers would get off and circle the port city. The Africans who resisted the soldiers were murdered. The soldiers broke into houses and palaces, stealing all that was valuable. The Africans fled in panic, unable to resist the better-equipped European soldiers. The Portuguese filled their ships with gold, ivory, and other valuables. They then bombarded the cities with their cannons and burned them to the ground. In just a few years the splendid commercial cities along the coast were in ruins. The Portuguese also attacked Islamic merchant ships that had been trading between east Africa and Asia — bombarding the ships and taking the goods. The Portuguese eventually controlled almost all the ocean-based trading between Europe, Africa, and Asia. They set up trading enclaves and forts along the coast which acted as collection points for the gold, ivory, and slaves brought from the interior. This wealth flowed into Europe.

## SPAIN ATTACKS THE AMERICAS

This was only the beginning. In the Americas, the Spanish became the main colonizers. They claimed lands that were inhabited by tens of millions of Native peoples and forced those people into virtual slavery. Spaniards took vast quantities of gold and silver from the Americas, which enriched small numbers of people in Europe. According to the Mexican indigenous leader Cuaicaipuro Cuautémoc, official receipts from Europe show that between 1503 and 1660, 185,000 kilos of gold and 16,000,000 kilos of silver were shipped from America (see p. 93). The Native people resisted and were almost wiped out by the superior weapons of the Europeans, as well as the diseases carried by the colonists. England, France, and Holland sent their own ships around the world in order to claim land and peoples as their own.

The Europeans wanted colonies for several reasons. They wanted raw materials from these places — not only gold and silver but spices, cotton, cocoa, palm oil, timber, and rubber. They also wanted the Native peoples to work for them for hardly any pay at all, so that the products the Native people made could be taken by the Europeans. In the West Indies the main product was sugar; other areas produced tea, coffee, cocoa, timber, tobacco, and cotton.

## AFRICANS STOLEN

The European colonizers had problems finding people to work their mines and plantations in the Americas. In part this was because so many Native peoples in the Americas died as a result of the initial arrival of the Europeans. Also, those who survived did not want to work as slaves. They resisted and oftentimes were able to escape, because they knew the land better than the Europeans.

The European colonists tried to "solve" this problem by stealing millions of people from Africa. They brought them in chains, stacked in holds of ships like sacks of flour, without enough food or water. The 3,000-mile voyage across the Atlantic, which typically took five or six weeks, was grueling and deadly. Millions died in what became known as the Middle Passage.

Slavery devastated western Africa. Millions of people, particularly youths and young adults, were taken away or died resisting. Some Africans helped the European slave traders, increasing conflict between Africans themselves. Western Africa became so engulfed in the slave

trade that little attention or resources were put toward improving farming or people's lives.

Haitian poet René Depestre described this in his poem "Black Ore" which reads in part:

*When all of a sudden the stream of Indian sweat  
was dried up by the sun*

*When the gold-fever drained out the final drop  
of Indian blood in the marketplace*

*And every last Indian vanished from around the  
mines*

*It was time to look to Africa's river of muscle*

*For a changing of the guard of misery*

*And so began the rush to that rich and limitless*

*Storehouse of black flesh*

*And so began the breathless dash*

*To the noonday splendor of the black-skinned  
body*

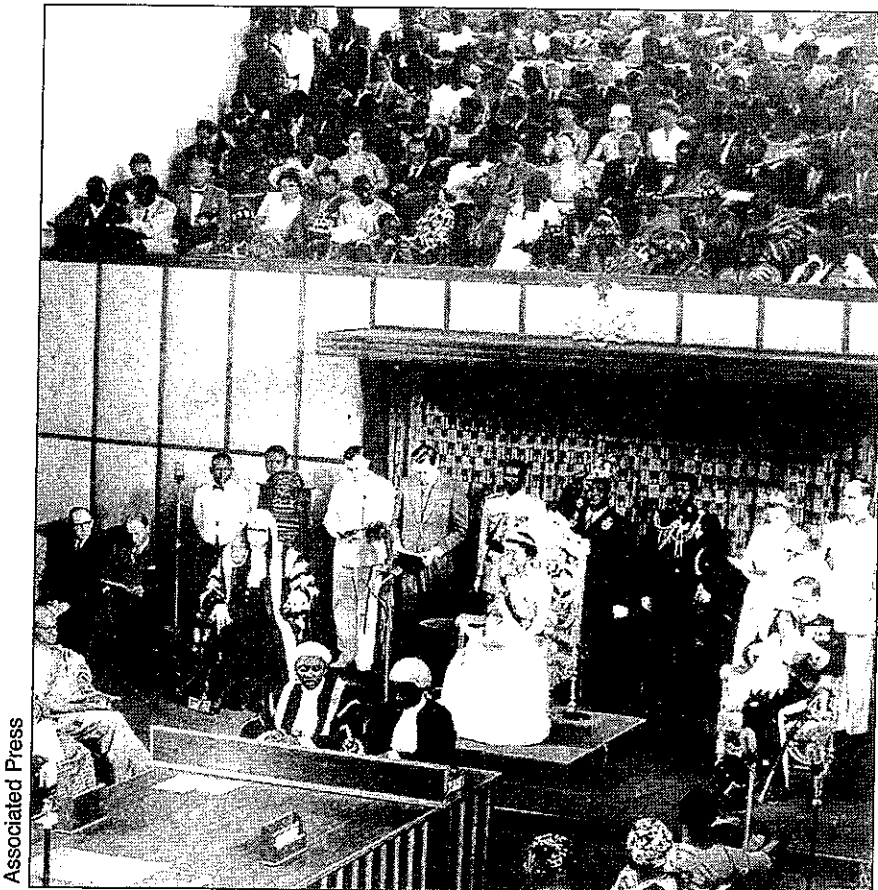
*Then all the earth rang out with the clatter of  
the picks*

*Digging deep in the thick black ore.*

## RESISTANCE TO OPPRESSION

The history of colonialism is full of stories of the horrible treatment of those who were colonized. It is also full of stories of resistance, when people fought back against the Europeans. For example, it took the Spaniards years of war to wipe out Native resistance in Peru, doing so only after suppressing a major revolt involving more than 100,000 people led by Tupac Amaru II in 1781-82. The Araucanian Indians of Chile weren't defeated until the late 1890s, after hundreds of years of battle. Native American armed resistance in what is now the United States continued up through the late 1890s with the Massacre of Wounded Knee. Colonialists met similar resistance throughout Asia and Africa.

But the results were more or less the same throughout the world. Resistance was crushed by the more militarily advanced European armies and navies. As a result, some Native peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Americas were completely wiped out. The wealth of those continents was sent back to Europe, which in turn made Europe all the more able to continue its domination of the world.



The Duchess of Kent addresses Parliament House in Ghana in 1957, shortly after Ghana ceased being a British colony.

## TYPES OF COLONIALISM

Not all colonialism was the same. Some colonies were established by the migration of settlers from the colonizing country, as in the British colonies in North America, Australia, and New Zealand. Some colonies were founded by religious groups fleeing persecution, such as the Pilgrims who settled in what is now Massachusetts. Other colonies were organized by groups of merchants or businessmen, such as the British, Dutch, and French East India Companies.

In North America most colonialism was of the settler variety, and the Europeans who moved to North America in the 13 colonies soon found themselves in disagreement with the "mother" country of England. The resulting American Revolution of 1776 led to a temporary decline in the power of England. In a very different kind of revolution, the slaves of Haiti, led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, rebelled and kicked out the French in 1804; the Mexicans, led by Miguel Hidalgo, and much of Latin America, led by Simón Bolívar, kicked out the Spaniards by 1825. Spain continued to hold Cuba and the Philippines until 1898, but otherwise retired from its role as a colonial power. England and other European nations, meanwhile, entered a new colonial era in the 19th century, looking to get rich off of other parts of the world.

## SECOND COLONIAL PERIOD

The riches produced by colonialism helped stimulate the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. This tremendous increase in the use of machines greatly strengthened the military power of European countries, allowing them to extend their rule over areas of Asia and Africa. In parts of Asia and Africa where before there had been only European commercial posts, European nations sent troops along with commercial agents, government officials, and Christian missionaries. The Europeans forced these areas to become markets for their industrial products and suppliers of raw materials.

By mid-century the British controlled all of India, which was ruled by a British viceroy; the Dutch assumed similar control over Indonesia, then known as the Netherlands East Indies; and the French seized Indochina. The entire continent of Africa, except for Ethiopia and Liberia, was divided up among the European powers after the Conference of Berlin in 1885. The British had almost all of eastern and southern Africa as well as large portions in the west; the French

took over the areas north and south of the Sahara Desert; Germany took territories on the Atlantic coast and on the Indian Ocean; Portugal extended its coastal enclaves of Angola and Mozambique toward the interior; and Belgium obtained the Congo. One colonialist referred to the continent that was being so greedily sliced up as "this magnificent African cake." One young sea captain, later a famous author, Joseph Conrad, found a situation which he called "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience."

Historian W. E. B. DuBois describes the pillage of Central Africa because of the profiteers set on supplying the world with ivory for billiard balls and piano keys:

Thousands of miles of fertile country were turned into wilderness and ruin. Hundreds of thousands of elephants were slain and thousands of human beings. It has been estimated that not more than one in five of the captives bearing ivory ever reached the ocean. Starved and weakened by disease and the strain of marching, they line the long paths with their dead.

Ivory was exported by the ton. As early as 1788, London was importing more than 100 tons of ivory a year. This continued for a century: 514 tons were imported in 1884. This meant the death of 75,000 elephants a year and, as DuBois noted, thousands of people. Henry M. Stanley wrote in 1891: "Every tusk, piece, and scrap.... had been steeped and dyed in blood. Every

**"A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India.... Neither as a language of the law, nor as a language of religion has the Sanskrit any particular claim to our engagement.... We must do our best to form a class of persons, Indian in blood and color but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."**

Lord Macaulay, introducing the India Education Act in the British Parliament

pound weight has cost the life of a man, woman or child, for every five pounds a hut has been burned, for every two tusks a whole village has been destroyed.... It is simply incredible that because ivory is required... populations, tribes, and nations should be utterly destroyed."

### FORCED LABOR AND CASH CROPS

The European colonialists forced Africans to produce cash crops no matter how low the prices were. They did this mainly by taxing people. Africans could get money to pay taxes only if they grew the "cash" crops the Europeans wanted. In some cases colonial powers went to even greater extremes. According to Guyanese writer Walter Rodney, French officials banned the Mandaja people (now part of Congo Brassaville) from hunting, so they would engage solely in cotton cultivation.

Often the British and French colonial governments would use forced labor to get work done at no cost to the Europeans. They demanded that Africans "give" their labor to colonial officials for a certain number of days. According to Rodney "a great deal of this forced labor went into the construction of roads, railways, and ports to provide the infrastructure for private capitalist investment and to facilitate the export of cash crops."

**One colonialist referred to the continent that was being so greedily sliced up as "this magnificent African cake."**

Rodney describes the impact of these policies on Africans:

Taking only one example from the British colony of Sierra Leone, one finds that the railway which started at the end of the 19th century required forced labor from thousands of peasants driven from their villages. The hard work and appalling conditions led to the death of a large number of those engaged in the work on the railway.

The French accomplished the same using different tactics. They forced Africans to join the French army and then used them as unpaid laborers. Rodney estimates that in one railroad project lasting 12 years, 25% of the workers died annually from starvation and disease — thousands of Africans.

Among the most barbaric of all the colonial powers were the Belgians under King Leopold II. According to historian Adam Hochschild,

writing in *King Leopold's Ghost*, an estimated 5 to 8 million people were killed in the Belgian colonialists' attempt to force the people of the Congo to supply rubber for Europe's needs.

Just as in earlier periods of colonialism, the European powers wanted the colonies only to provide raw materials, low-paid workers, and open markets so that European products could be bought. The English, for example, took fine cotton from India and Egypt but banned the Indians and Egyptians from processing the cotton into finished clothing. Instead Indians and Egyptians had to buy imported (and more expensive) clothing made in England. Thus Indian artisans who made fine textiles were forced out of business, and India became poorer.

In this way the economies of many countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America were stunted. Instead of "developing," they were actually "underdeveloped" by Europeans. Prohibited by European powers from continuing their own cultures based largely on farming, and also prohibited from developing manufacturing, the colonies came to depend heavily on a few crops or minerals, the prices of which went up and down in world markets. These policies led to African economies becoming "monocultures," relying on one agricultural crop or mineral for most of their foreign currency and trade. For example, Gold Coast grew mainly cocoa and Senegal and Gambia grew groundnuts (peanuts).

### RESISTANCE CONTINUES

Africans and Asians continued to fight against European domination and were met with barbaric repression. In 1898, for example, British troops massacred 20,000 Sudanese at Obudrman, near Khartoum. The "Boxer Rebellion" in 1900 by the Chinese against European colonizers was another such example. The Chinese were particularly angered because the British were trying to get their people addicted to opium, a harmful drug, so that they could profit and control a vast part of Asia. The British successfully used military force against the Chinese so that opium could be unloaded in Chinese ports. This led to widespread opium addiction in parts of China.

The United States eventually became a colonial power itself. The U.S. military fought its own "colonial" wars early in the nation's history — dozens of wars with the Native peoples throughout the 1700s and 1800s. From 1846 through 1848, the United States fought a war

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with Mexico, which resulted in the U.S. seizure of one third of Mexico. The United States annexed Hawai'i in 1898, and a short time later defeated Spain in a war, acquiring Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam, as colonies, and control over Cuba. The subsequent U.S. war against Filipino independence fighters was especially horrific. The United States had become a colonial power in its own right.

It wasn't until after World War II (1939-1945) that the countries of Asia and Africa were able to force a weakened Europe into beginning to grant them independence. In some cases it came with huge struggles, such as that of the Indian people, led by Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress against the British, or that of the Vietnamese people, led by Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh against the French.

Even though almost all countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America are now formally independent and have their own representatives at the United Nations, many of the economic and political relationships that were established during colonialism continue. Because of colonialism, many countries of the Third World still rely on one or two main crops. Most have never fully developed an industrial base. In addition, many of these countries owe lots of money to wealthy

nations — that is, they are in debt (see p. 75) and cannot afford to spend money on things their own people need.

When people in more wealthy nations think about helping other people who are hungry and in poverty, it's important to recognize how they got that way. The fact that Spanish colonialists, for example, took tons of gold and silver from the Americas is connected to today's widespread hunger in South America.

Walter Rodney explains this connection when he writes about a well-established European-based organization that sees itself helping Third World people. This organization "called upon the people of Europe to save starving African and Asian children from kwashiorkor [a deadly, protein-deficiency disease] and such ills.... [but] never bothered their consciences by telling them that capitalism and colonialism created the starvation, suffering, and misery of the child in the first place." ■

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## 1562: Conquistadores Destroy Native Libraries

**F**ray Diego de Landa throws into the flames, one after the other, the books of the Mayas.

The inquisitor curses Satan, and the fire crackles and devours. Around the incinerator, heretics howl with their heads down. Hung by the feet, flayed with whips, Indians are doused with boiling wax as the fire flares up and the books snap, as if complaining.

Tonight, eight centuries of Mayan literature turn to ashes. On these long sheets of bark paper, signs and images spoke. They told of work done and days spent, of the dreams and the wars of a people born before Christ. With hog-bristle brushes, the knowers of things had painted these illuminated, illuminating books so that the grandchildren's grandchildren should not be blind, should know how to see themselves and see the history of their folk, so they should know the movements of the

stars, the frequency of eclipses and the prophecies of the gods and so they could call for rains and good corn harvests.

In the center, the inquisitor burns the books. Around the huge bonfire, he chastises the readers. Meanwhile, the authors, artist-priests dead years or centuries ago, drink chocolate in the fresh shade of the first tree of the world. They are at peace, because they died knowing that memory cannot be burned. Will not what they painted be sung and danced through the times of the times?

When its little paper houses are burned, memory finds refuge in mouths that sing the glories of men and of gods, songs that stay on from people to people and in bodies that dance to the sound of hollow trunks, tortoise shells, and reed flutes.

*From Eduardo Galeano, Memory of Fire: Genesis. New York: Pantheon, 1985, p. 137.*



"We must find new lands from which we can easily obtain raw materials and at the same time exploit the cheap slave labour that is available from the natives of the colonies.

The colonies would also provide a dumping ground for the surplus goods produced in our factories."

—Cecil Rhodes,  
British colonialist,  
southern Africa



# A Small Place

BY JAMAICA KINCAID

*In the book A Small Place, Antigua writer Jamaica Kincaid attacks the lingering effects of colonialism. The Caribbean island of Antigua was "discovered" by Columbus in 1493 and became a British colony in the 17th century. It gained "independence" in 1967.*

**H**ave you ever wondered to yourself why it is that all people like me seem to have learned from you is how to imprison and murder each other, how to govern badly, and how to take the wealth of our country and place it in Swiss bank accounts? Have you ever wondered why it is that all we seem to have learned from you is how to corrupt our societies and how to be tyrants?

You will have to accept that this is mostly your fault.

Let me just show you how you looked to us. You came. You took things that were not yours, and you did not even, for appearances' sake, ask first. You could have said, "May I have this, please?" and even though it would have been clear to everybody that a yes or no from us would have been of no consequence you might have looked so much better. Believe me, it would have gone a long way. I would have had to admit that at least you were polite.

You murdered people. You imprisoned people. You robbed people. You opened your own banks and you put our money in them. The accounts were in your name. The banks were in your name. There must have been some good people among you, but they stayed home. And that is the point. That is why they are good. They stayed home.

But still, when you think about it, you must be a little sad. The people like me, finally, after years and years of agitation, made deeply moving and eloquent speeches against the wrongness of your domination over us, and then finally, after the mutilated bodies of you, your wife, and your children were found in your beautiful and spacious bungalow at the edge of your rubber plantation — found by one of your many house servants (none of it was ever yours; it was never, ever yours) — you say to me, "Well, I

wash my hands of all of you, I am leaving now," and you leave, and from afar you watch as we do to ourselves the very things you used to do to us.

And you might feel that there was more to you than that, you might feel that you had understood the meaning of the Age of Enlightenment (though, as far as I can see, it had done you very little good); you loved knowledge, and wherever you went you made sure to build a school, a library (yes, and in both of these places you distorted or erased my history and glorified your own).

But then again, perhaps as you observe the debacle in which I now exist, the utter ruin that I say is my life, perhaps you are remembering that you had always felt people like me cannot run things, people like me will never grasp the idea of Gross National Product, people like me will never be able to take command of the thing the most simpleminded among you can master, people like me will never understand the notion of rule by law, people like me cannot really think in abstractions, people like me cannot be objective, we make everything so personal. You will forget your part in the whole setup, that bureaucracy is one of your inventions, that Gross National Product is one of your inventions, and all the laws that you know mysteriously favour you.

Do you know why people like me are shy about being capitalists? Well, it's because we, for as long as we have known you, *were* capital, like bales of cotton and sacks of sugar, and you were the commanding, cruel capitalists, and the memory of this is so strong, the experience so recent, that we can't quite bring ourselves to embrace this idea that you think so much of.

As for what we were like before we met you, I no longer care. No periods of time over which my ancestors held sway, no documentation of complex civilisations, is any comfort to me. ■

*Jamaica Kincaid was born in St. John's, Antigua. She is author of At the Bottom of the River and Annie John. This reading is excerpted from A Small Place. New York: Penguin, 1988, pp. 34-37.)*