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Colonial Identity in School Textbooks in the British West Indies: Some Preliminary Remarks on Edward W. Daniel's *West Indian Histories*

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Abstract
Dispersed across the vast Caribbean Sea, for much of the twentieth century, the wider British West Indies consisted of eight colonies: the islands of The Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, the Windward Islands, and the Leeward Islands, as well as the mainland possessions of British Guiana and British Honduras. With markedly different ethnic, sociocultural, and religious compositions, each colony was shaped by a panoply of economic, social, and geographical factors, including the lasting imprint of the slave trade and – at different points in history – the desire of various European powers to dominate and control the different territories. With education representing a key vehicle of promoting British colonial identity and cohesion in these diverse lands located far away from the 'mother country', this presentation aims to explore how this identity is depicted in a well–known series of colonial–era school textbooks. First published in 1936 and designed for pupils in the British West Indies, Edward W. Daniels's three–volume series of West Indian Histories *were commonplace in the late colonial and the early independence period. Accordingly, utilising a postcolonial perspective and applying a case study approach, the aim of this preliminary contribution is to examine how dominant narratives were presented through the analysis of two selected historical events (the Atlantic slave trade and the Second Maroon War), thus illustrating how history was portrayed and contextualised in the pages of these volumes.*

Keywords: *analysing history textbooks; the British colonisation of the Caribbean; the British Empire in the 20th century; education in the colonial West Indies; portrayal of past events in imperial schoolbooks*

Introduction

After Christopher Columbus's voyages to the Americas at the end of the 15th century opened up that part of the world to European colonisation, the ensuing decades and centuries saw various European powers compete for primacy in this 'new' geopolitical arena (Clarke 1990). Though Great Britain itself was in process of territorial change, eventually becoming a United Kingdom through the addition of Scotland and Ireland to England and Wales (Wallenfeldt 2025), British interests were strongly represented in the Western Hemisphere. This was demonstrated not only through the significant territories held in North America, but also by its Caribbean colonies. Indeed, as detailed in Brereton &

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Clarke (2025), starting from the 17th century onwards, Britain's West Indian possessions grew from islands such as Barbados, Antigua, and Jamaica (all colonised before the mid–17th century) to include other possessions which had formerly been in the hands of other major European imperial powers such as Spain and France. In the latter group could be included the islands of St Vincent, Trinidad, and St Lucia, which fell under British control in the latter half of the 18th century and the early 19th century. By the dawn of the 20th century, Britain's colonial Caribbean possessions consisted of six island–based colonies – The Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago, the Windward Islands, and the Leeward Islands. To this number could be added the mainland colonies of British Honduras and British Guiana, situated on the Central American and South American landmasses, respectively (for more, see Brereton & Clarke 2025).

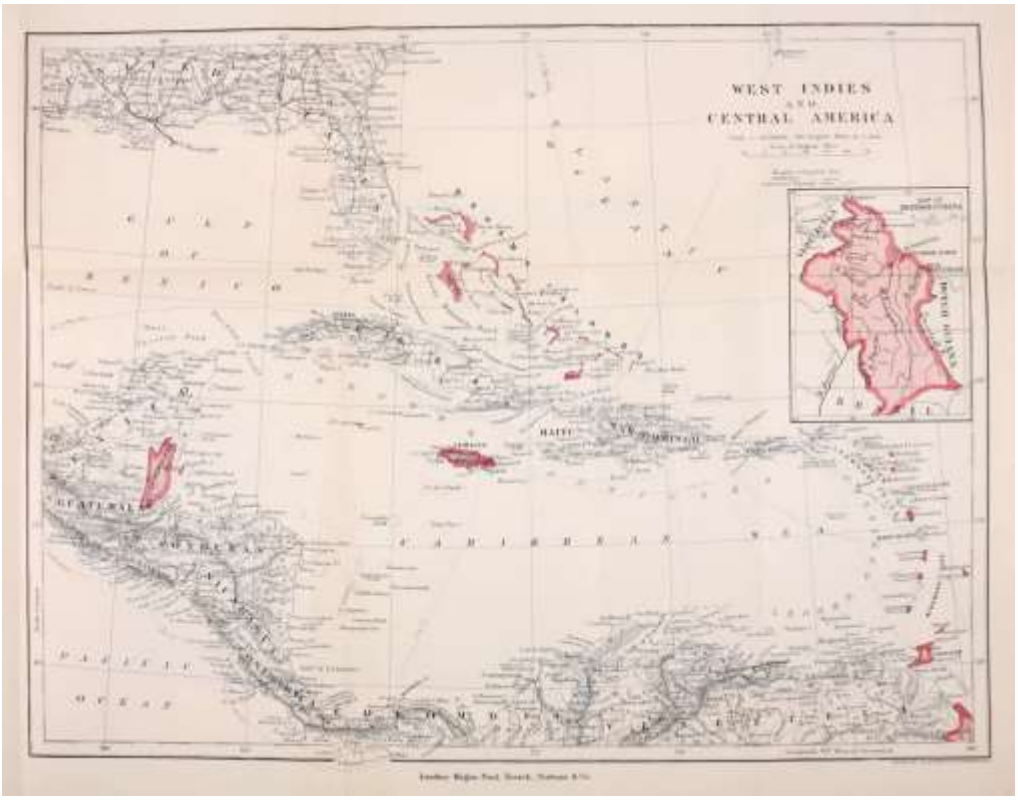

Figure: The British West Indies and Central America
Source: *The British Empire Series, Vol. III: British America*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd., 1900 (see Wikimedia 2023)

After the end of World War Two, with burgeoning independence movements coming to the fore across the whole British Empire, efforts were made to link the Britain's West Indian islands as a single federative entity

during the early postwar years (see Parker 2025: 48-52). However, political and other differences between the various colonies meant that the majority of the islands chose to pursue their independence as separate countries during the 1960s and 1970s. Presently, the former British–ruled colonies in the region (including on the mainland) now number twelve independent countries (Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad & Tobago), of which three (Barbados, Guyana, and Trinidad & Tobago) are independent republics with a president – rather than the British monarch – as head of state, Yet it is necessary to mention that Britain has continued to maintain a foothold in the region, with several entities currently possessing the status of British Overseas Territories: Anguilla, Montserrat, the Cayman Islands, the Turks & Caicos Islands, and the British Virgin Islands (Foreign, Commonwealth, & Development Office 2024).

As noted, though many of the Anglophone Caribbean islands have been independent nations for several decades, the centuries of rule from London have ensured that British structures and traditions still remain deeply embedded in local contexts, as ongoing debates on decolonisation processes have exemplified (e.g., see Catteau 2022; Hoyte-West 2025). Most notably, this includes the ever–present usage and dominance of the English language which, notwithstanding the existence of local creoles, has been maintained as the only official language of all of these nations (Hoyte-West 2022; 2024).

In addition, as the disintegration of attempts to create a federation demonstrated, the manifold differences in the sizes, economies, societies, and ethnoreligious compositions of the different islands have been noted since colonial times. Indeed, though a wider analysis of this could be regarded as outside the parameters of this brief study, in common with attempts in other global contexts, a sense of cohesion and imperial loyalty was encouraged by the British colonial education system (Lougheed 2021). Accordingly, in line with general changes in schooling and education policy in Europe and beyond, basic schooling in the Caribbean was opened up from the 1870s onwards (Johnson 2002: 28). In the context of education in the colonial milieu, the development and creation of relevant scholastic materials such as textbooks could be said to represent a vital aspect, not only in transmitting core facts, but also in promoting and promulgating a specific vision of imperial identity (Erdal Yıldırım & Aslan 2017: 137), thus acting as an important component of intangible cultural heritage (Saraç Durgun 2024: 28).

As a basic work–in–progress study, through offering a preliminary contribution to the ongoing discussions on colonialism and the colonial legacy in the West Indies, this article aims to utilise a case study–based approach to explore how dominant narratives of colonialism are presented in a well–known series of colonial–era school textbooks from the 1930s – Edward W. Daniel's

West Indian Histories. In the first instance, it offers some general remarks on the importance of school textbooks as historical and cultural artifacts and resources, before presenting some formal details regarding the context surrounding the *West Indian Histories* and their author. After outlining the research approach, two case studies taken from the books will be analysed, thereby illustrating how dominant narratives were presented at that specific time period.

School textbooks and the *West Indian Histories*

As mentioned above, there was a significant worldwide growth in compulsory education from the late 1800s onwards. In the European context, this was concomitant with the rise in national identity, the creation or codification of standardised languages, and the advent of modern nation–states. In increasing levels of literacy and numeracy, the institutionalisation of education systems – as well as curricula and materials – also served to create and promote common values within a society (Tröhler 2016).

Both as an academic domain and as a resource, textbooks can be considered "polyvalent objects of research that play specific roles in a range of societal contexts" (Fuchs & Bock 2018a: 4). Textbook studies (and, in more modern times, educational media) represent a vibrant area of research (Fuchs & Bock 2018b). As summarised elsewhere, textbooks are important in shaping a worldview, in providing justification of ideological aspects, as well as – crucially – offering different perspectives on history, geography, and culture (Grindel 2017). In short, whilst remaining highly relevant from both contemporary and historical standpoints, textbooks are also an interesting object of study in terms of their sociopolitical aspects (Clark et al. 2024).

In the light of the above, it is therefore unsurprising that there is a large body of work on various facets of textbooks from different colonial contexts (e.g., see Thomas & Moran 1992; Müller 2018), as well as case studies of specific instances (Bertram & Wassermann 2015). However, a cursory overview suggests that there has not been so much to date on the British–ruled Caribbean. Education in the colonial British West Indies was patterned on British models, expanding from the mid–19th century onwards (Coates 2012) – notably, the first full university on the islands was not established until after World War Two. Therefore, traces of the legacy of colonial rule can be still seen in the structure of Caribbean education systems (Warrican 2020). Indeed, as Johnson (2002) details in his comprehensive study on the colonial and postcolonial teaching of history in the region, British school curricula and standardised examinations were utilised even after independence, up until the formation of the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC). Up to the present day, the CXC has offered a range of secondary school qualifications tailored to

the modern context of the English–speaking Caribbean (see Low 2017: 108–109; also CARICOM 2025).

In moving to the object of the present analysis, the *West Indian Histories* comprised a series of three volumes written by Edward Walley Daniels. These were history textbooks written specifically for West Indian students, ranging from the "middle standards" in Book I (Daniel 1936a: 5) up to "secondary schools, training colleges, the highest classes in primary schools, and for pupil teachers' examinations" in Book III (Daniel 1936c: v). Accordingly, the books focus primarily on Caribbean–related events, though other topics and events from elsewhere are occasionally presented too. The *West Indian Histories* were first published in 1936 (Anonymous 1938), which of course was an important year for Britain and its colonial empire. That year saw not only domestic instability following the death of George V and the abdication crisis involving Edward VIII and the accession of George VI, but also international issues with regard to Hitler's re–occupation of the Rhineland territories, a direct violation of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles and a forerunner to the expansionist Nazi aims which would eventually lead to the outbreak of World War Two (see Blakeway 2010).

The *West Indian Histories* were published by the noted colonial publisher Thomas Nelson & Sons, Ltd., originally headquartered in Scotland but – as the inside pages of the books affirm – with outposts located across the British Empire and beyond. As discussed in Joseph (2012), Thomas Nelson & Sons was also the publisher of the famous 'Royal Readers' series, which additionally served as an important vehicle to promote imperial identity and colonial ideology through literary texts aimed at schoolchildren.

With their imperialist mindset, the *West Indian Histories* were widely used in schools not only during colonial times, but surprisingly even after independence, running to several reprints. As mentioned, the textbooks comprised three volumes – further bibliographical information is detailed in the table below:

Book	**Title**	**Chapters**	**Pages**	**Publisher**	**Year**
I	*Pictures of the Past*	16	216	Thomas Nelson & Sons	1936
II	*Migrations and Discoveries*	18	236	Thomas Nelson & Sons	1936
III	*Story of the West Indian Colonies*	19	408	Thomas Nelson & Sons	1936

Table. Bibliographical information about the *West Indian Histories* (Daniel 1936a; 1936b; 1936c)

At the time of publication, Edward W. Daniel (1896–1952) held the position of Assistant Director of Education in the British colony of Trinidad & Tobago, later becoming Director. Daniel succeeded J. O. Cutteridge in this post, an

Englishman who was known for introducing certain education reforms in the colony and also for authoring the 'West Indian Readers' and 'West Indian Geographies' series of textbooks (Campbell 1996; Johnson 2002: 31). Born in London, Daniel served in World War One and spent a large portion of his life in colonial Trinidad (Dix, Noonan, Webb 2008). He received an undergraduate degree from the University of London and was principal of the colony's Teacher Training College; he had "special training in pedagogy" (Campbell 1996: 128). In addition, he was an active member of the colony's Historical Society (see Jarvis 1998) and also held the postnominals FRST, representing his status as a Fellow of the now–defunct Royal Society of Teachers (The Historical Society of Trinidad & Tobago 1940: 5).

As presented on a website containing *inter alia* the activities of a Red Cross Committee set up in Trinidad in 1939 (Burke 2019), Daniel became a leading figure in the British administration of the increasingly restive colony. As also detailed elsewhere, Daniel was embroiled in a scandal towards the end of his life, involving a car accident under the influence of alcohol and subsequent efforts to minimise the more embarrassing details about the issue (Charles 2016: 150, citing Liverpool 1990; see also Burke 2019). With the incident satirised in vocal form by a Trinidadian calypsonian, legal attempts to prosecute its singer backfired enormously, thereby creating a considerable brouhaha across the island (Trinidad Express 2012).

In ostensibly attempting to offer West Indian perspectives on Caribbean history for the region's schoolchildren, the ideological perspectives contained in the books – as will be highlighted in the two selected case studies – represent and promote colonial and Eurocentric views of the region and its past. Indeed, though perhaps not as explicitly as in earlier works (for example, see Carmichael 1838), it is important to mention that some of the nomenclature, perspectives, and opinions contained in the textbooks could certainly be regarded as outdated – and even offensive – by modern–day readers.

Research approach

Aware of the foundational and preliminary character of this study, the analysis presented here takes a qualitative case–study approach (Priya 2021) based on two selected examples, utilising close reading of the texts. In terms of the source material, initially various editions and reprints of the *West Indian Histories* were consulted. However, after careful consideration and in the interests of consistency, it was decided to use the original 1936 editions as the basis for the following analysis.

In presenting the case studies through a postcolonial lens, the intention was to examine how dominant imperial narratives were presented in the textbooks. This was performed through analysing how selected past events relevant to the history of the British West Indies were portrayed and

contextualised in the books. Among the examples considered were the Amerindian pre–colonial islands; the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Caribbean at the end of the 15th century; the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807 and the emancipation of the slaves in the British Empire in 1836; and the arrival of indentured labourers from British–ruled India from the mid–19th century onwards.

In the interests of space, two items from the many historical events portrayed in Daniel's *West Indian Histories* were selected for further evaluation. The first, taken from Book I, offers some general remarks on the slave trade in the Caribbean. The second case, taken from Book III, focuses on the portrayal of the Second Maroon War in Jamaica, an uprising which took place at the end of the 18th century.

The Atlantic slave trade (Book I, Chapter 10)

The first example is taken from the tenth chapter of Book I, *Pictures of the Past* (Daniel 1936a). Entitled 'The Bad Old Days of Slavery', the intention here appeared to be to offer a short overview of the Atlantic slave trade and its repercussions on the West Indies. The chapter opens as follows:

> When Columbus discovered the Antilles, or West Indian Islands, they were peopled by Indians who came from the same stock as the Red Man. To–day there are no Indians left, and the islands are peopled by white and coloured people and by negros (Daniel 1936a: 123).

Thus, from the outset of the chapter, Daniel reinforces the then–commonplace Eurocentric notion that the Americas were seemingly unknown lands waiting to be 'discovered'. Using several outdated terms for the indigenous, black, and mixed–heritage populations, in this instance the fate of the original indigenous inhabitants of the islands is simply discounted without further explanation. In introducing the slave trade, the author writes that:

> Today all civilised people know and believe that it is wrong to take away a man's freedom and make a slave of him when he has done no wrong, but men did not always think so (Daniel 1936a: 123).

In an attempt to show how mindsets have changed over time, Daniel underscores that though the slave trade should be viewed negatively from a contemporary 1930s standpoint, early colonial actors of course did not do so. In underlining how embedded slavery was in the upper echelons of West Indian society, Daniel cites the example of a well–known theological college in Barbados:

> Even Codrington College, in Barbados, where Anglican clergymen are trained, once owned slaves. […] The college could not get rid of them, but they were treated kindly, and taught to be Christians (Daniel 1936a: 124).

Here, though highlighting an instance of the interaction of colonial religious institutions with slavery, the author seemingly skirts around the apparent ethical conundrum, ostensibly lessening the horrors of the trade in human beings by observing that these slaves were reportedly well–treated and – as will be mentioned later – converted to Christianity. The chapter continues by mentioning that there were not only slaves of African descent, adding that there were also slaves of white British origin:

> It was not only negroes who were sent to the West Indies as slaves, but also Englishmen, Irishmen, and Scotsmen who had risen against their king or ruler (Daniel 1936a: 124).

As detailed above, these so–called "bond–servants" (Daniel 1936a: 124) had been punished for their disloyalty by forced labour in the colonies. To this, Daniel adds that the slave–masters "worked them harder than negroes and often worked them to death" (Daniel 1936a: 124), thus arguably offering an attempt to mitigate the treatment of other enslaved persons by insinuating that these slaves from Britain were treated harsher. The chapter continues by providing a short overview of the historical context underpinning slavery and the origins of the triangular trade. In presenting the conditions of tribal warfare in Africa, Daniel writes that:

> The Europeans, however, were not the first to make slaves of negros. They were only continuing something which had been started by the negros themselves (Daniel 1936a: 124–125).

Subsequently, a slave sale is described, where the author invites the reader to empathise with the trauma suffered by the separated families: "We can imagine the negroes' grief, and the cries they uttered at those times. (Daniel 1936a: 128). Yet attempts to lessen the psychological and emotional impact of the Caribbean slave trade are made after a comparison with the North American context: "In the West Indies many of the masters were kind to their slaves" (Daniel 1936a: 129).

Returning to the notion hinted at in the earlier brief mention of the slaves owned by Codrington College, it is noted that, given that lack of provision of schools and churches for them, the slaves were "heathens" (Daniel 1936a: 132). However, underlining the so–called 'civilising mission' which commonly underpins discussions of colonialism in various global contexts, it is added that "kindly" Moravian missionaries "came to teach them about Jesus Christ" (Daniel 1936a: 132) – i.e., through converting the slaves to Christianity,

certain religious values and perspectives of the colonising power would therefore be instilled.

Yet, though this section of the analysis has highlighted elements of the textbooks which may be considered controversial, it is important to underline that slavery – as the title of the chapter underlines – is portrayed negatively both here and also elsewhere in the textbooks, with Daniel noting that "However well off the slaves were, they still lacked freedom, and they had no means of improving themselves" (Daniel 1936a: 133).

The Second Maroon War (Book III, chapter 10)

The second case study presented here is taken from the tenth chapter of Book III, *Story of the West Indian Colonies* (Daniel 1936c), the third and last book in the series. Aimed at more advanced–level students, it details several historical events, including what Daniel terms the "Maroon Rising", known as the Second Maroon War. This uprising took place in Jamaica in 1795 and 1796, during a time of great revolutionary fervour and upheaval in the wider Caribbean (for more, see Fortin 2006; McKee 2017; Sivapragasam 2019; etc.).

As Daniel details in his textbook, the Maroons were "descendants of runaway slaves" and, echoing colonialist perspectives, he adds that "from the time of the capture of the island they had been a source of trouble" (Daniel 1936c: 166), also noting that large sums of money had been spent on them. He adds that attempts – via a treaty – had been made to pacify them, but that during the 1790s, colonial regulations forced them into their settlements. Regarding the onset of the situation, Daniel portrays the catalyst as follows:

> The immediate cause of the outbreak was the flogging of two Maroons of Trelawney Town who had been convicted of pig stealing. It was not to the punishment they objected, but to the indignity of being publicly whipped in the presence of felons and recaptured slaves, many of whom they had helped to bring in (Daniel 1936c: 166).

It is noted that the men returned to their settlement, and "abused all whites they met on the way" (Daniel 1936c: 166), thus highlighting the issue of the Maroons' colour and ethnicity and their perceived lack of respect for the colonists, before making it know that the aggrieved Maroons would attack Montego Bay, one of the major towns in colonial Jamaica. Daniel follows with a detailed description of the events from the colonial viewpoint. In presenting the arrival of British forces to quell the uprising, he observes:

> the arrival of troops was most fortunate; not only did it prevent the slaves from rising and joining the insurgents, but many of the older Maroons themselves advised peace (Daniel 1936c: 167).

In highlighting the apparent lack of consensus within the Maroons themselves, Daniel therefore could be said to be aligning his narrative with the typical colonialist notion of 'divide and rule' – i.e., ensuring loyalty to the ruling power by accentuating the differences between different groups. In this regard, he continues by noting that the overpowered Maroons were "compelled to agree to a treaty" (Daniel 1936c: 169), and their lack of fealty to the British was punished harshly. Daniel notes that as a result, 600 Maroons were first deported to Nova Scotia, adding the regressive comment that this "absurd plan of settling negroes in a cold climate failed" (Daniel 1936c: 169). He then adds that this group of exiled Maroons, who ancestors had resided in Jamaica for many years, were subsequently transported across the Atlantic to west Africa. There, they were settled in the British colony of Sierra Leone, with Daniel drawing attention to the fact that Sierra Leone was a colony "established for enfranchised slaves" (Daniel 1936c: 169), making no mention of the region's African inhabitants. After presenting this information, the author concludes by stating that "After this, the Maroons gave no further trouble" (Daniel 1936c: 169), thereby succinctly reminding the reader (and colonial subject) of the ostensible consequences that disloyalty and disobeying the British imperial powers could bring.

Concluding thoughts

This short article has aimed to explore how dominant narratives related to the colonial British West Indies have been presented in Daniel's *West Indian Histories* through analysis of the portrayal of two specific events. In the first instance, though the title of the chapter underlines a negative approach to the topic, it could be advanced that certain aspects of how slavery and the slave trade are presented can seem – from a modern standpoint – to be depicted in a rose–tinted way which obscures or mitigates the real–life horrors. This includes mentions of slavery in other regions and eras, the highlighting of the fact that there were also slaves with British origins, as well as comparisons between the treatment of North American versus West Indian slaves. In terms of the second study on the Second Maroon War, the Maroons are depicted as upstarts who seemingly deserved their punishment of deportation to a far–off continent, rather than offering a more nuanced picture of their situation and a more in–depth analysis of the reasons underpinning their resistance to colonial imposition. In addition, in terms of their timing, it is important to note that the first edition of the *West Indian Histories* was published a century after the emancipation of the slaves in the British Empire. Though this event would have of course not been within living memory, nonetheless memories of slavery would doubtlessly have persisted in generational memories.

As a representative component of the British West Indian education system, the rationale of the *West Indian Histories* was clear – the aim of

promoting the development of loyal colonial citizens conscious of their place in the imperial family. In this regard, the depiction of these two complex events can be said to comply with colonialist perspectives, once again demonstrating how the textbooks were distinct products of their time. Yet, as mentioned previously, global conflict and change was on the horizon. From the 1950s onwards, many of the British West Indian colonies would embark on the pathway to independence, though of course the colonial influence still lingers. In the specific context of the *West Indian Histories*, the final words in this article will be from Dr Eric Williams, the noted Oxford–educated historian, author, and statesman who was the first prime minister of independent Trinidad & Tobago. Chapter 3 of his 1944 autobiography, *Inward Hunger*, notes his run–ins with the aforementioned Cutteridge, Daniel's predecessor as Trinidad's Director of Education, and the author of the previously–stated series of readers and geography textbooks aimed at local Caribbean schoolchildren. In demonstrating the reception of these earlier pedagogical materials, Williams notes that the rationale underpinning Cutteridge's works was

> …pedagogically, irreproachable. But West Indian public opinion, and not only in Trinidad, considered that the books presented West Indian life in a disparaging light (Williams 1997: 722).

To this observation, as Johnson (2002: 32) also highlights, Williams follows by adding the following value judgement of Daniel's series of *West Indian Histories*. In damning them with faint praise, confirmation of their colonial mindset and purpose is demonstrated unequivocally:

> …these texts, admirable though they are as accounts of the annexation of the West Indies by various European powers, are everything or anything but West Indian histories (Williams 1997: 722).

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