
Richard Hill

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RICHARD HILL¹

Richard Hill, one of Jamaica's most famous sons, was born at Montego Bay on the first of May, 1795. In 1779 his father, also named Richard, came to Jamaica from Lincolnshire, where the family had lived for several centuries, and along with a brother settled at Montego Bay. There he became a substantial merchant, and on his death in 1818 left his property in Jamaica to his son and two daughters, Ann and Jane. Hill's mother, who had East Indian as well as Negro blood in her veins, survived her husband many years, her son being constant in his attention to her up to the last.

At the early age of five Hill was sent to England to reside with his father's relations then living at Cheshunt, there to remain till his fourteenth year when he was sent to the Elizabethan Grammar School at Horncastle to finish his education. Upon the death of his father in 1818 Hill returned to Jamaica. Although his property came into the possession of his son and two daughters the father's death in some way involved Richard Hill in irksome money obligations which harassed him for many years, and even after he had discharged them left a gloom over his life.

His father was a man in advance of his times, hating and deploring the intolerance and the tyranny that grew out of slavery as it then existed in Jamaica. On his death-bed he made his son solemnly pledge himself to devote his energies to the cause of freedom, and never to rest until those civil disabilities, under which the Negroes were laboring, had been entirely removed; and, further, until slavery itself had received its death-blow.

The time and opportunity for fulfilling this pledge soon came, for in the year 1823 the Negroes in Jamaica commenced their agitation for obtaining equal privileges with

¹ Taken in great measure from the biographical notice by the writer in the *Journal of the Institute of Jamaica*, July, 1896.

their white brethren. It does not appear that Hill attached himself openly to any of the societies that were formed for the purpose of carrying on this agitation. But he freely gave them the benefit of his abilities, helping the whole movement with his advice and with his pen.²

In the year 1826 Hill visited Cuba, the United States and Canada, and then went on to England, landing there in September. In 1827 he was deputed by the organization in Jamaica to use his efforts in England to secure the assistance of the leading members of the Anti-Slavery party. During his stay there he was on terms of close intimacy with Wilberforce, Buxton, Clarkson, Babington, Lushington and Zachary Macaulay,³ all members of the Anti-Slavery Society, as well as Pringle and other men eminent for their philanthropy and talents and noted for the deep interest they took in all that related to the elevation and welfare of the Negroes of the British West Indian colonies. The petition from the people of color of this island to the House of Commons for the removal of their civil disabilities, was entrusted to Hill, who upon the occasion of presenting it was permitted "within the bar" of the House. On that occasion Canning delivered his last speech a splendid effort in favor of the petitioners. Hill remained several years in England and contributed largely by his pen and his speeches to enlighten the public mind of England as to the real character of West Indian slavery. But the remittances from the "people of color" in Jamaica, never very large, soon became few and far between. So Hill, always independent in every way, even in his friendships and political alliances, maintained himself and his sister, Jane, almost entirely by his contributions, literary and scientific, to several popular newspapers and periodicals.⁴

² For a general sketch of this period see W. J. Gardner's *History of Jamaica*, pp. 211-317.

³ This movement had for years been promoted by the heroic few. It was then getting a hearing in Parliament. They first advocated the abolition of the slave trade and then directed attention to slavery.

⁴ These contributions closely connected Hill with the men whose new thought revolutionized science a few decades later.

After a residence of several years in England, Hill was sent by the Anti-Slavery Society on a visit to San Domingo, chiefly for the purpose of ascertaining by personal observation and inquiry what was the actual social and political condition of the people of that island.⁵ But his commission had a more extensive object than that attached to it, which, however, directed him to obtain besides all the information he possibly could concerning the natural resources of every part of the country through which he was to travel. San Domingo was then under the wise and able rule of President Boyer, the whole island forming one undivided republic, enjoying internal tranquillity, and being in a comparatively flourishing condition. On his way from England to Port-au-Prince, where he arrived on the sixteenth of June, 1830, Hill visited France staying there a few months. He spent nearly two years in San Domingo travelling incessantly and making notes about everything. He has left more than one sketch-book full of sketches showing a knowledge of perspective, a keen eye for the picturesque and a true artist's feeling. He sailed from San Domingo for England on the third of May, 1832, and then for Jamaica a few months after, never again to quit his native country. In that year he was made justice of the peace for Trelawny.

He was never greedy for money and seems to have been ill-paid for his labors in San Domingo. Upon his return to Jamaica either on that account or from motives of policy he ceased all communication with the Anti-Slavery Society, and only now and then did he write to one or two of its members, and even then more as personal friends than as old political allies.

On the third of February, 1834, Hill was appointed one of a number of forty stipendiary magistrates whose duty it was to adjudicate between the former slaveholders and

⁵ San Domingo was then independent and the success of the free Negroes there would have a direct bearing on the anti-slavery movement, as indifferent white men sometimes contended that the free Negro was a failure.

their "apprentices."⁶ This appointment he held until the first of January, 1872. In this connection it may be interesting to quote the opinion of Hill expressed by the Rev. James Thome and J. H. Kimball, who in 1838 published for the American Annti-Slavery Society an account of *Emancipation in the West Indies: a six months' tour in Antigua, Barbadoes and Jamaica in the year 1837*. They say: "We spent nearly a day with Richard Hill, Esq., the secretary of the special magistrates' departments, of whom we have already spoken. He is a colored gentleman, and in every respect the noblest man, white or black, whom we met in the West Indies. He is highly intelligent and of fine moral feelings. His manners are free and unassuming, and his language in conversation fluent and well chosen. . . . He is at the head of the special magistrates (of whom there are sixty (*sic*) in this island) and all the correspondence between them and the governor is carried on through him. The station he holds is a very important one, and the business connected with it is of a character and extent that, were he not a man of superior abilities, he could not sustain. He is highly respected by the government in the island and at home, and possesses the esteem of his fellow citizens of all colors. He associates with persons of the highest rank, dining and attending parties at the government house with all the aristocracy of Jamaica. We had the pleasure of spending an evening with him at the solicitor general's. Though an African sun has burnt a deep tinge on him he is truly one of nature's nobleman. His demeanor is such, so dignified, yet so bland and amiable, that no one can help respecting him."⁷

Hill represented St. James and afterwards Trelawny

⁶ Slavery in the British West Indies was not actually abolished instantly. Gradual emancipation was the method tried in most parts and even in cases of immediate emancipation the system of apprenticeship which followed was not much better than slavery.

⁷ The office of Secretary to the Stipendiary Magistrates was established in order to assist Governor Sligo to get through the enormous amount of correspondence entailed by the complaints sent to him in connection with the administration of the laws with regard to the apprenticeship system.

in the House of Assembly which sat from October 24, 1837, to November 3, 1838, and during that time he served on several important committees, notably one appointed to inquire into the state of the several courts of justice in the island. But the fact that he unsuccessfully contested the representation of Port Royal in November, 1838, may have had something to do with his withdrawal from political strife. About 1840 he was offered the governorship of St. Lucia, but his love for his native island caused him to decline the offer. He was in 1855 nominated a member of the Privy Council which post he held only about ten years.

His political career was ended early in life, and the remainder of his days were passed in retirement at Spanish-Town where he had taken up his abode upon being appointed stipendiary magistrate. He occupied his time with his daily official duties and literary work and seldom left home except for change of air at the sea side, to visit some intimate friend in Kingston, or perhaps to take the chair at some missionary gathering, or to join in the deliberations of a committee meeting. In 1847 Hill acted as Agent General of Immigration, and in December of that year he submitted an interesting report to the Assembly.

When the cholera swept over the island in 1851 Hill turned his botanical studies to good account. The saline treatment was then in high esteem; but by means of the bitter-bush, *Eupatorium nervosum*, a shrub not unlike the wild sage in appearance, which grows freely on waste lands, he is said to have alleviated much suffering and saved many lives.

He was Vice-President from 1844 to 1849 of the Jamaica Society for the encouragement of Agriculture and other Arts and Sciences, instituted in 1825. In 1849 this Society ceased to exist and in its stead sprang up the Colonial Literary and Reading Society, of which Hill was one of the managing committee. He was one of the nominated members of the then Board of Education. He was a member of the original council of the Royal Agricultural Society of Jamaica, founded in 1843, Vice-President as late as 1857

of the Royal Society of Arts of Jamaica, established in 1854 as the Jamaica Society of Arts, and Vice-President of the Royal Society of Arts and Agriculture, which was the result of the amalgamation of these two societies in 1864. In 1861 he had undertaken to edit jointly with the Rev. James Watson, the Secretary, the *Transactions of the Royal Society of Arts*, to which he contributed various notes. But in the first number of the *Transactions of the Incorporated Royal Society of Arts and Agriculture* (1867) is the record of a vote of sympathy and regret at his inability to attend through ill-health; and although he contributed articles to the journal he was not able to be present at the meetings. His leisure was devoted to scientific study, especially the ornithology, ichthyology, and anthropology of the West Indies. He never let a single opportunity pass by, if he could possibly help it, without trying to benefit his country with his ready pen, and he always gave all the encouragement he could to those who seemed at all anxious to study any subject with which he was in the least acquainted. He read some twenty-five lectures in all at various times on various subjects.

On the title page of his *Naturalist's Sojourn in Jamaica*, as well as in his preface, Gosse bears testimony to the assistance which Hill rendered to him. The appearance of Hill's name on the title page ("Assisted by Richard Hill, Esq., Cor. M. Z. S. Lond., Mem. Counc. Roy. Soc. Agriculture of Jamaica") was, Mr. Edmund Gosse tells us in his memoir of his father, greatly against that modest gentleman's wish. He tells us also that the friendship for Hill was one of the warmest and most intimate friendships of his father's life. The publication of this book was delayed by the fact that every sheet was sent to Spanish Town to be read by Hill.

Hill contributed to several scientific publications both in England and America and by this means became connected with some of the leading learned societies of the world. He was corresponding member of the Zoological Society of London, of the Leeds Institute and of the Smithsonian Institution, and he numbered amongst his correspondents

Darwin and Poey. Darwin had written in September, 1856, to Gosse for further information with respect to the habits of pigeons and rabbits referred to in his *Sojourn*, and it was at Gosse's suggestion that Darwin wrote to Hill. In a later letter, of April, 1857, he says: "I owe to using your name a most kind and valuable correspondent in Mr. Hill, of Spanish Town."

The cony of Jamaica, *Capromys brachyurus*, found commonly in his day, but now becoming extinct, was named by Hill in Gosse's *Naturalist's Sojourn*; as well as four birds—three in the *Birds of Jamaica* and one in the *Annals and Magazine of Natural History*, and two fishes. One bird (*Mimus hillii*), two fishes and four mollusca, three being Jamaican, were named after Hill.

In addition to his collaboration with Gosse of the *Birds of Jamaica* and the *Naturalist's Sojourn in Jamaica*, Hill's best-known literary productions are *A Week at Port Royal*, published at Montego Bay in 1858; *Lights and Shadows of Jamaica History*, published in Kingston in 1859; *Eight Chapters in the History of Jamaica, 1508-1680*, illustrating the settlement of the Jews in the island which appeared in 1868; and *The Picaroons of One Hundred and Fifty Years Ago*, which was published in Dublin in 1869.

He contributed, moreover, a large number of articles on natural history subjects to various Jamaica publications too numerous to mention. Some of these were: *The Jamaica Almanacs*; *Transactions of the Jamaica Society of Arts*; *Transactions of the Royal Society of Arts of Jamaica*; *The Jamaica Physical Journal*; *Jamaica Monthly Magazine*; *Jamaica Quarterly Magazine*. In England he contributed to the *Proceedings of the Zoological Society*; and in America to the *Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Science*, Philadelphia, and the *Annals of the Lyceum of Natural History*, New York.

In stature he was tall and commanding, though perhaps the comparison of him to Antinous made by the writer of an obituary notice was a little exaggerated. All who knew him bore testimony to his generosity, philanthropy, mod-

esty, even temper, and unfailing self-forgetfulness, his kindness of heart, his piety, and his catholicism in matters of religion. A portrait of him executed in oils, it is said, by James Wyeth, an American artist who spent a short season in the island, is in the Jamaica History Gallery at the Institute of Jamaica, which also possesses a pencil sketch of him done by himself.

For two or three years before his death Hill suffered from failing eyesight. He died, unmarried, at Spanish Town, on September 28, 1872, at the advanced age of seventy-eight. His remains were followed to the grave by an immense concourse of all classes.

FRANK CUNDALL,
Secretary, The Institute of Jamaica