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## IN MEMORIAM MICHAEL CRATON, HISTORIAN

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### Introduction

**M**ichael Craton, who died in September 2016, was an English/Canadian historian who made a major contribution to the historiography of the English-speaking Caribbean. He was born in London in 1931, and educated at Christ's Hospital in Horsham, West Sussex, and at University College London, where he graduated with a B.A. in History in 1955. He spent six years after graduation teaching at the Government High School in Nassau, The Bahamas, before emigrating to Canada in 1963, obtaining his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees at McMaster University in Ontario. In 1966 he joined the faculty at the University of Waterloo, also in Ontario, and stayed there until his retirement in 1997. He was named a Distinguished Professor Emeritus in 1998.



Michael Craton

### The History of Small Islands

It was the stint teaching high school history in Nassau which brought Craton to the history of The Bahamas, and by extension, of the Caribbean. In the 1950s, little professional research on Bahamian history had been undertaken, and this group of small and scattered islands tended

to be left out of historical and other works on the Caribbean (strictly speaking, it is located in the Atlantic rather than the Caribbean). Over the next decades, books and articles by Craton—and by his frequent collaborator, D. Gail Saunders, and one or two other historians, notably Howard Johnson—transformed Bahamian historiography, bringing it firmly into the mainstream of the renaissance of professional historical writing on the Caribbean.

Craton's *A History of The Bahamas* first appeared in 1962 and went through several revised and updated editions, the most recent in 2009. It remains the most important single-volume general history of that nation. In the 1990s, Craton and Saunders, the founding National Archivist of The Bahamas and his former Ph.D. student at Waterloo, co-authored the two-volume *Islanders in the Stream: A History of the Bahamian People* (1992, 1998). This was a deeply researched, detailed and comprehensive social history of The Bahamas from pre-Columbian times to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; Volume 2 won the prestigious Elsa Goveia Prize of the Association of Caribbean Historians. After retirement, Craton continued to publish on The Bahamas: in 2002 his authorized biography of Lynden Pindling, the first Prime Minister of the nation, appeared, followed in 2007 by his *A-Z of Bahamas Heritage*, in the well-known Macmillan Caribbean series, which he was invited to write.

No doubt his work on The Bahamas won Craton the commission to research the history of the Cayman Islands, a group of even smaller islands not far from the former. The result was *Founded upon the Seas: a History of the Cayman Islands and their People* (2003), a detailed and thoroughly professionally researched study of these little communities of fishing and sea-faring folk.

Thanks in good part to Craton's work, these small islands can now boast of comprehensive and professional histories. This was reflected in his chapter 'The Historiography of The Bahamas, Turks & Caicos Islands, Cayman Islands and Belize' in Volume VI of the UNESCO *General History of the Caribbean* (1998).

## Plantations, Enslavement, Resistance

From his initial interest in Bahamian history, Craton soon took up broader themes of the region's past, especially plantation society, enslavement and resistance. In 1970, with his other frequent collaborator, the British historian James Walvin, they wrote *A Jamaican Plantation: The History of Worthy Park, 1670-1970*. This pioneering study was based on rich plantation records from 300 years of continuous operation as a sugar estate; it was the first book-length history of a single Caribbean plantation. In 1978, Craton revisited Worthy Park in his *Searching for the*

*Invisible Man: Slaves and Plantation Life in Jamaica*. This book provided a detailed social history of Worthy Park's slaves and their descendants, including selected individual biographies and utilizing oral history as well as documentary sources.

In the mid-1970s, Craton authored or co-edited two useful general works on British Caribbean slavery and emancipation. His *Sinews of Empire* (1974) was a good popular history, based on up to date research (including his own), and *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: A Thematic Documentary* (1976), co-edited with Walvin and David Wright, was a collection of sources. Both books were aimed primarily at students and the general reader. In 1979, he edited a volume of important articles on New World slavery, *Roots and Branches: Current Directions in Slave Studies*. This book emerged from a conference at Waterloo, sponsored by Waterloo and Wilfred Laurier Universities and organized by Craton, which many of the leading scholars of enslavement attended.

Perhaps his most influential book was *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (1982). This covered the whole of the British Caribbean and every kind of slave resistance, including Maroons and Black Caribs, climaxing in the great Jamaican rebellion of 1831-32. Craton was a pioneer in slave resistance studies, which became a significant dimension of the historiography of enslavement in the Americas (and elsewhere). He was the obvious choice to author the chapter on slave resistance in Volume III of the UNESCO *General History of the Caribbean* (1997).

Of course Craton, a very productive and indeed prolific historian, published many journal articles and book chapters on these themes. Some of the most important were collected in *Empire, Enslavement and Freedom in the Caribbean: Essays in West Indian History, 1966-1996* (1997). This substantial book provides a useful gateway to his work.

## Conclusion

After he emigrated to Canada, Craton visited the region, especially The Bahamas, very often. He had personal as well as professional links to the region: his wife Patricia is a Trinidadian former student of his. In a generous gesture, he donated his considerable trove of Bahamian and other books and journals on the Caribbean to the College (now the University) of the Bahamas, where they formed the Craton Collection in its library. He served as External Examiner for history courses and theses for both The University of the West Indies and The University of Guyana.

Craton was a very active member of the Association of Caribbean Historians, rarely missing its annual conferences until the early 2000s; he

often gave papers, chaired panels, and asked characteristically long and complex questions. And at Waterloo, he supervised Caribbean graduate students and other master's or doctoral students researching Caribbean topics, such as his collaborator Gail Saunders.

Craton's standing as an eminent British/Canadian historian was fittingly recognized by his being named a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (UK) and a member of the Royal Society of Canada.

Over a period of more than forty years, Craton made an impressive contribution to British Caribbean historiography. He was a pioneer of Bahamian (and Caymanian) history, and an early researcher on Caribbean plantation history, and on the modes and forms of slave resistance. Always an advocate for studying the history of ordinary people, he wrote at the end of *Testing the Chains*: "The time has surely come for history to be written from the perspective of the majority rather than from that of more eloquent elites." Michael Craton's work has certainly illuminated the history of the "majority" of the people of the English-speaking Caribbean.