BARBADIAN DIALECT

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My wife Doris and I have spent several Winter vacations in Barbados, that delightful Caribbean island lying approximately at Latitude 13, a bit of information quite unnecessary to the average voyager who prefers to leave such details to the boat- and air-people whose proper business it is; nor is it our intention to trespass into the field of the travel agency. However, that low latitude indicates that Barbados is close enough to the Equator to guarantee decent weather in the Winter months.

We come to rest each year in a mini-villa (for not all villas are huge), and keep abreast of the times in the more unfriendly areas we have left behind with the several island newspapers -- an excellent daily and several weeklies. Although Barbados has a dialect of which all the islanders are cognizant and which is extensive enough to warrant a fair-sized glossary, most of the people speak the King's (or, better, the Queen's) English: not surprising in view of the long-standing cultural and economic ties with Empire. Journalistic prose is impeccable and except in those instances of direct quotation that specifically call for dialect 'English-English' is the order of the day.

The dialect, however, presents problems to the uninitiated, for besides the many unfamiliar words that have been assimilated from many sources difficulty is compounded by the unexpected accenting of familiar words, strange word-ordering, impropriety of pronouns, many ellipses, etc. The machine-gun rapidity of speech does little to help matters. One understands the frustration of visitors who are not reassured by the inhabitants' assurances that the tongue they are hearing is really English.

I suppose Doris and I might be categorized as Clipping-Snippers or, in a world where Romance languages are still esteemed, Excerptophiles. We enjoy the clips at the moment and later, when home, enjoy them in retrospect. It is, we think, an innocent diversion. We've recalled the following items related to Barbadian dialect with pleasure and hope you may share it.

In the Fall of 1979, a certain Colin Layne was arrested and accused of breaking into a building in Bridgetown, the Island's capital city. At his trial he testified that he had been drinking at Mr. King's rum shop, and did not remember the exact time; but he thought it was between 6 and 10 in the evening. He left the rum shop, making his way toward the center of town, holding his T. deman gun in his hand, until the Sergeant at the scene, "Hold him down and wait another officer.

A year later, we were enjoying a meal at the restaurant where we make a regular practice of stopping. A Commission on the Arts was invited to the Island while on a tour, and as a character son approach clear by order of the T. g. got all. The Commission about say, "The Sergeant Lee that Hy..."

Glancing over the gloss over Barbadian English. There are various situations of the folk-tales caricaturing Stephen Foret de Toll de Bell. Barbadian Alberton Wickham, a little reminiscent people Stan Bac Watchman i written in "education", know what to say. "But Grandme, too" an

Malaprops sometimes, sometimes, to us was writ...
center of town, when he heard pursuing footsteps, and felt a hand holding his pants'. A voice, which he recognized to be that of Sergeant T., demanded sternly, "Where the rest!" -- and the Sergeant had a gun in his hand. Layne was told "Come!" and several feet further on the Sergeant fired a shot in the air which brought other policemen to the scene. The accused said that the Sergeant told one of the policemen "Hold he, I coming back" whereupon the officer and the accused sat down and waited for the Sergeant's return. When he came, he said to another officer "I carrying in he" and they walked to the CID ...

A year or so ago, a number of unsolved murders and other crimes had accumulated in Barbadian Police files, and the authorities saw fit to make a resolute attempt at their solution. With this in view, the Malone Commission, consisting of three eminent experts in the field of crime, was invited to hold hearings in Bridgetown. One crime on the docket was the murder of one Victor Parriss, killed one May night in 1978 while on a beach with his fiancee, Hyacinth Goring. Margaret, called as a character witness for her sister Hyacinth, made her feelings quite clear by saying "Jesus Christ, when worthlessness was sharing my sister got all." An ex-fiancée, Egbert Lee, when questioned by the Commission about Hyacinth, reiterated this estimate: "I would hear people say, 'She so worthless (pronounced 'worthless') though!' It was of Lee that Hyacinth once said "The only body I have other than you is your shadow." A colorful suspect indeed!

Glancing at the brighter side of the Island's journalism that is usually shown us, it is interesting to note that no attempt is made to correct or gloss over any dialectical peculiarities, or to render them into 'good' English. The real speech of the people is reproduced verbatim in the various situations where it is called for. In our country the phoneticizing of the folk-speech of different ethnic groups has been frowned on as being caricaturing and somewhat insulting. It is a long time, now, since Stephen Foster could write: "Nelly was a lady, / Last night she died; / Toll de bell for lubly Nell, / My dark Virginy bride. But to their credit Barbadian authors are not ashamed to reproduce their dialect. John Wickham, an author of great talent with many stories on Island life to his credit, can write an article for the Bajan, a monthly more than a little reminiscent of our Time magazine in format, called "All Udder People Stan Back". Timothy Callender's incredible photo-novel, The Night Watchman is a rich source of Bajan in which all the conversations are written in the vernacular: "...and I intends to gi'my son a proper education", "I tired, yes, I been up all night. The child sick. I ain't know what to do", "C'dear, and you does have to work so hard already" And, from the same author's collection of short stories, It So Happen: "But Grandma, I like James, though... I like he bad, and he say he like me, too" and "Eh-eh! You ain't know? Man, you missing a big basa-basa!

Malapropisms are common in Island speech and it is difficult to tell, sometimes, the contrived from the genuine. One which especially appealed to us was written by a critic on the Advocate-News who described the paintings of a young man making his debut in the art world as "gloriously
splashed with dazzling inhibitions", a certainly enthusiastic, if puzzling, encomium.

It would be unfair to end this article on such a trivial note, and not to point out the very strong West Indian literary movement in which Barbados is taking a leading role. Few small islands can claim such a large number of fine writers, many of them with international reputations. John Wickham and Timothy Callender have been spoken of already; George Lamming, Derek Walcott and many others should be mentioned. And, in particular, Frank Collymore.

Frank, a personal friend for many years, was a good scholar, an author of prose and poetry, and editor (until his death in 1979) of Bim, the Island's literary magazine. He fostered and encouraged young talent in his countrymen and, to paraphrase Wickham (who succeeded him in the editorship of the magazine), did more than any other single individual or institution for the cause of West Indian writing.

Among his many activities he found time to produce a small book about the native speech called Barbadian Dialect. I have it at hand as I write and it is recommended to anyone interested in this subject. In addition to the more common words in everyday use, it includes many rarer ones. Among them may be found borrowings from Spanish, French, African, and dialectical English, all assimilated into Bajan; some eighteenth-century relics and a few Elizabethan survivals; many figures of speech, including euphemisms, portmanteau words, ellipses and redundancies, and mala-propsims. Here are a few to beguile the reader:

**AFTERNOON** a euphemism for backside  
**AUNTIE-MAN** an effeminate man  
**BAD-PLAY** to be deceitful or unfaithful  
**BALLOON JUICE** a sweet drink sold in the marketplace; soda-pop  
**BASSA-BASSA** general noise, confusion  
**BIRDSPEED** very fast  
**BLUE-DUPPY** a bruise on the hand caused by a cricket ball  
**BREAK FIVES** put 'er there (shake hands)  
**BULL IN A CORK HAT** a government employee who artifically inseminates cattle  
**BUSH-BATH** a bath steeped in herbs  
**BUSYLICKUM** a busybody  
**CAFUFFLE** to confuse  
**COOL OUT** to sit and enjoy the breeze  
**DOG-DANCE** to deliberately follow someone  
**DUCK REST** broken sleep at night  
**FINGERSMITH** a facetious term for a thief  
**GEORGIE BUNDLE** a bundle made up of various oddments  
**GITTIMA** phonetic for 'given to me', a gift  
**GOAT HEAVEN** a state of bliss  
**GRIND GINGER** to work oneself into a temper  
**GRUMPUS-BACK** a surly person  
**HADJA-BUCK** an uncouth, ill-bred person

HICKEY  
HOP-AND  
HOUSE-CRAWL  
JOKO to pull  
KEM a she  
MOTHER-NEPSHA A  
NEPSHA A  
OBISKY A  
PEA-EYE  
PISS-TO-W  
PIVY a  
POMPASS  
POOR-RAID  
PUPPY-SH  
QUAIKA-H  

hence:  
ROOKETY  
ROSE TRE  
SAYNEY-I  
SMALL BOO  
SOUSSY-ZYA  
STANNA  
SWO  
TOREKLY  
TUSH-TEE  
TWEE NOF  

UNNA (also  
VAP to sn:  
WIZZY-W  
WULLAY  

HICKEY an uncouth country district; Podunk
HOP-AND-DROP to walk with a pronounced limp
HOUSE-CLEAR pale from lack of sunlight
JOOK to stick or punch with a pointed object
KEM a sham or deception
MOTHER-IN-LAW a strip of torn cuticle near the finger-nail
NANCY STORY fairy tale
NEPSHA AND KIAH Tom, Dick and Harry
NIGGER TEN a cross marked on the site of a violent crime or accident
OBSOCKY outmoded, odd
PEA-EYE to peep at
PISS-TO-WINDWARD a clumsy or inept person
PIVVY a small bit; a tad
POMPASSET ostentatiousness in dress
POOR-RAKEY scrawny
PUPPY-SKULL a bowler hat
OUAKA-HADJA a small puppet moved with strings (quocker-wodger);
ROOKETY rocky + rickety, a portmanteau word
ROSE TREE TRIMMER a person who cleans latrines for a living
SAWNEY-MALAWNEY a lackadaisical person
SMALL BONES pregnant, as in 'she is making small bones'
STRANNA the motion of a kite out-of-control; hence, bewildered
THRALLIA something of no consequence
TORECKLY phonetic 'or 'directly' ; immediately, at once
TUSH-TEETH projecting teeth
TWEED NOUN TOOH if something is 'neither twee nor tawn' it is
neither one thing nor another -- just plain nonsense
UNNA (also WUNNA) all of you (probably of African origin)
VAP to snap the fingers when throwing dice
WIZZY-WIZZY whispering
WULLAY alas (an expression of grief)