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The Price of Conscience

Howard Noel Nankivell and labour unrest in the British Caribbean in 1937 and 1938

BRINSLEY SAMAROO

The British Empire was created by thousands of public officers who were despatched from London to carve out an empire over which the sun would never set. These governors, Colonial secretaries and treasurers, attorneys general, inspectors of customs and other officers were trained to maintain law and order so that British investors could obtain secure holdings in the various colonies. There was always a British military presence close at hand, which could easily be summoned to keep the natives under control. Equally, the education system was geared to socialise subject peoples into an acceptance of the greatness of the British Empire. *Civis Britannicus Sum* (I am a British citizen) was a password to Imperial protection and favours. Such protection, however, was hardly the prerogative of the subject peoples; they were destined to be hewers of wood and drawers of water.

The vast majority of administrators expanded the Empire with little thought about the welfare of the colonised, their family lives, health issues or their dismally low wages in the midst of the ostentatious living of the employer class. This biography tells of an exception to this rule, Howard Noel Nankivell, who was born in Jamaica to a British naval family, educated in England and then employed as a civil servant in that island in 1911. In 1929, he was promoted from Principal Clerk in Jamaica to Acting Colonial Secretary in Trinidad and Tobago. From that time until the middle of 1938, he sought to combine the Colonial objective of keeping the Colony safe for investment with a heavy dose of social concern, seeking to balance the capitalist urge for the holy profit with a genuine concern for the workers' welfare. However, the merchant and the planter oligarchy strongly repudiated this approach to governance and Nankivell was viciously attacked by the oil and sugar barons who had strong connections in the British parliament and in the Colonial Office. These vested interests succeeded in securing the resignation of the Governor, Sir Murchison Fletcher, and the transfer, on demotion, of Howard Noel Nankivell as Colonial Treasurer in Cyprus. In November 1938, Nankivell fell off a train in France en route to London.

This is the story of a maverick senior public officer, a faithful servant of the British Crown, who dared to let conscience be his guide and suffered the consequences of his deviation from the accepted Imperial norm.

- ***A unique biography of an unlikely champion of the colonised and downtrodden in Jamaica in the early 20th century***
- ***An essential addition to 20th century Jamaican history***

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