

REVIEWS

Priceless Heritage. History and Lore of Estate St. George, Home of the St. George Village Botanical Garden of St. Croix, U. S. Virgin Islands, by Ben [jamin Robert] Kesler. Frederiksted: Published by Ben R. Kesler, First Printing, January 1980. (2) iii-x, (2) 1-55 (1) p. \$7.00.

Priceless Heritage, Ben Kesler's history of Estate St. George's, joins briefer published accounts of Estates Bethlehem ('Plantage Bethlehem', *National Arbejds-mark* 1968) and Sion Farm (*The History of Sion Farm Estate*, Formerly Queen's Quarter 26, From 1776-1976, by the students of The Lew Muckle Elementary School [1976]) in the very limited field of histories of sugar plantations on St. Croix. With the increasing interest in local histories among practitioners of the profession, any emphasis on individual Cruzan estates would be most welcome.

Priceless Heritage incorporates a basically good, if sometimes speculative, interpretation of the dazzling cavalcade of Cruzan history as mirrored in Estate St. George's. Mr. Kesler has deftly incorporated a review of human habitation on St. Croix from A.D. 250 to the end of the Danish colonial period in 1917, and on up to the present. Further chapters deal with the early Danish colonization, and the owners and laborers of the estate. *Priceless Heritage* concludes with summaries of St. George's archaeological, historical, structural, zoölogical and botanical heritage. It is evident that this work was written largely to promote the interests of the St. George Village Botanical Garden, which presently occupies the greater part of the prehistoric and historic sites at the estate.

From the perspective of the professional historian, however, *Priceless Heritage* fails to live up to certain expectations. One deals with historiography, *i. e.*, the thorough documentation of sources, whether utilized *verbatim* or paraphrased, are due credit as the origin of particular hypotheses or interpretations. It is unfortunate that Kesler's work is undocumented; even where footnotes exist, they are explanatory in nature, and many of these should also be supported by references. Because of this, there are many intriguing statements made in *Priceless Heritage* whose significance as sources for future historical research currently is of questionable value.

Mr Kesler also makes some rather broad assumptions. For example:

Priceless Heritage, using the evidence provided by the 1671 French map of St. Croix,³ [Map by F. Lapointe, 1671.] will claim that St. George was named from the English sugar works⁴ [*Referred to as the *Sucrierie des*

Anglois.] located adjacent to, or within St. George until proof is provided that this claim is wrong. (pp. 9-10)

This improperly attempts to place the burden of proof on the reader, rather than on the author.

Again, *Priceless Heritage* asserts that '... there is evidence that both Indians and the Africans made pottery in St. George...' (p. 42). The question begs to be asked as to the existence of material or documentary evidence for this important archaeological discovery.

Finally, as is frequently found in contemporary works, uncritical research techniques or novel phrases as incorporated in *Priceless Heritage* may result in the intrusion of myth or distortion beyond that to which this Island's history has already been subjected. One noticeable modern practice has been to drop the possessive form from the name of certain Cruzan estates. Thus, for example, 'Butler's Bay' becomes 'Butler Bay', and 'St. George's' is transformed into 'St. George'.

Mr. Kesler described Baron H. F. A. Eggers as being 'in charge of the Danish Militia during the 1878 "big trashing"' (p. 49). This is in error on two points. First, Baron Eggers held a regular commission as lieutenant in the *Dansk Vestindiske Haerstyrke* (the Military Force consisting of Danish Army personnel assigned to the Danish West Indies). Secondly, the Militia in the Danish West Indies was dissolved in 1852 and not reconstituted until 1907; therefore it was non-existent in 1878.

Can the village at St. George's really be classified as a 'Danish/African village' (p. 44) *sans* thatched roofs, storks, or wattle-and-daub huts? Was the Riot of 1878 ever called the 'big trashing' until now? (The Riot of 1878 was called the Labor Riot by the planters, the 'Fireburn' by the laborers, and *Oprør* by the Danes.) Is it not regrettably a consequence of Mr. Kesler's dependence on certain second-hand information in his compilation (*vid. The St. Croix Avis*, 29 May 1980, p. 11) that such comparatively and easily available data as the register for owners of St. George's in the late 1940's should include a person who never owned that estate at all?

Despite the shortcomings mentioned, Ben Kesler's *Priceless Heritage* serves several valuable functions.

Most important of these is an increased public awareness, and, hopefully, appreciation, of a heretofore frequently neglected aspect of Danish West Indian history that can not in all honesty be separated from other facets and still preserve a balanced picture. It is sincerely hoped that future edi-

tions of *Priceless Heritage* will incorporate those corrections and elaborations suggested herein, thereby upgrading the work to one of truly professional stature.

—WILLIAM F. CISSEL.

Three Towns. Conservation and Renewal of Charlotte Amalie, Christiansted, and Frederiksted of the U. S. Virgin Islands. Editor: Ole Svensson; English translation: Hanne Ringsted; Publisher: Danish West Indian Society, Copenhagen, 1980 [originally published by the Department of Town Planning, Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen, 1965]. (2) i-x, 1-122 (2) p. \$19.50

The former Danish West Indies (now the Virgin Islands of the United States) have held an attraction for many Danes long after their old colonies were sold in 1917. This attraction is due, in part, to the beautiful tropical scenery and climate, plus the memories of ancestors who lived in these Caribbean islands. For some Danes, however, there is a deeper reason: the realization that these islands contain many irreplaceable examples of XVIII and XIX century buildings, gems of the Danish colonial period.

Shortly after the end of World War II, professors Kay Fisker and Erik Herlów, of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, travelled through the Virgin Islands and were distressed to find that many of the colonial buildings were being destroyed or badly remodeled. Beginning in the latter part of the 1940's, a form of prosperity had reached the islands in the form of the American tourist, and new shops and hotels were hastily being set up to tap this new source of wealth. Some buildings were torn down while others were remodeled (often called 'restoration'), and little or no thought was given to architectural style, building techniques, or the cultural value of the structures.

Fisker and Herlów saw these dangers and, when they returned to Denmark, Herlów asked the Royal Academy to send an 'expedition' back to the islands. The expedition would be composed of professors and students from the Academy's architectural school—scholars with the ability to 'map out, register, survey and photograph towns, street-interiors and buildings in the same way that buildings of historical value . . . have been dealt with in Denmark.'

Herlów's proposal was well received, a commission formed and the project was funded through gifts from Danish and American corporations. The work in the islands began in 1961 and the final report was published in 1965, under the title *Three Towns*. Long

unavailable in book stores, we are pleased to see that the current interests in restoration and good urban design have brought about its second printing.

It was impossible to compile all of the vast amount of data produced by the survey in one 122-page booklet, but *Three Towns* is an excellent reference book, perhaps the best that has been done on the architecture of the Virgin Islands of the United States. The book is not limited solely to architecture, but concerns itself with other problems which either have been ignored or neglected; parking in the towns, city-core planing, etc. Two sections of the book contain information dealing with the technical quality of the structures and conservation of the towns' buildings and their unique colonial styles.

An important feature of *Three Towns* is the suggested designs for modern structures, which could be constructed with modern materials and yet be fully compatible with the older buildings in the towns. This section could not be published at a more opportune time, when entire blocks in the town of Frederiksted are being completely levelled under an outdated Urban Renewal program.

Frederiksted residents, like those in other towns hit by poorly planned bulldozing errors, are asking local officials what type of new structures will be built on the razed land. It may be that, unlike the construction work of the late 1960's and the 1970's, architects will turn to *Three Towns* for the answer. If so, the town will indeed be fortunate, and it would prove to be one of the first times that the valuable information contained in *Three Towns* has been put to use.

The book is well researched in its historic content, clear in its aims and goals and as important today as it was fifteen years ago, when it was first published. It certainly would be an extremely fine addition to the library of anyone involved in the restoration and protection of West Indian buildings.

—ROBERT S. BROWN.