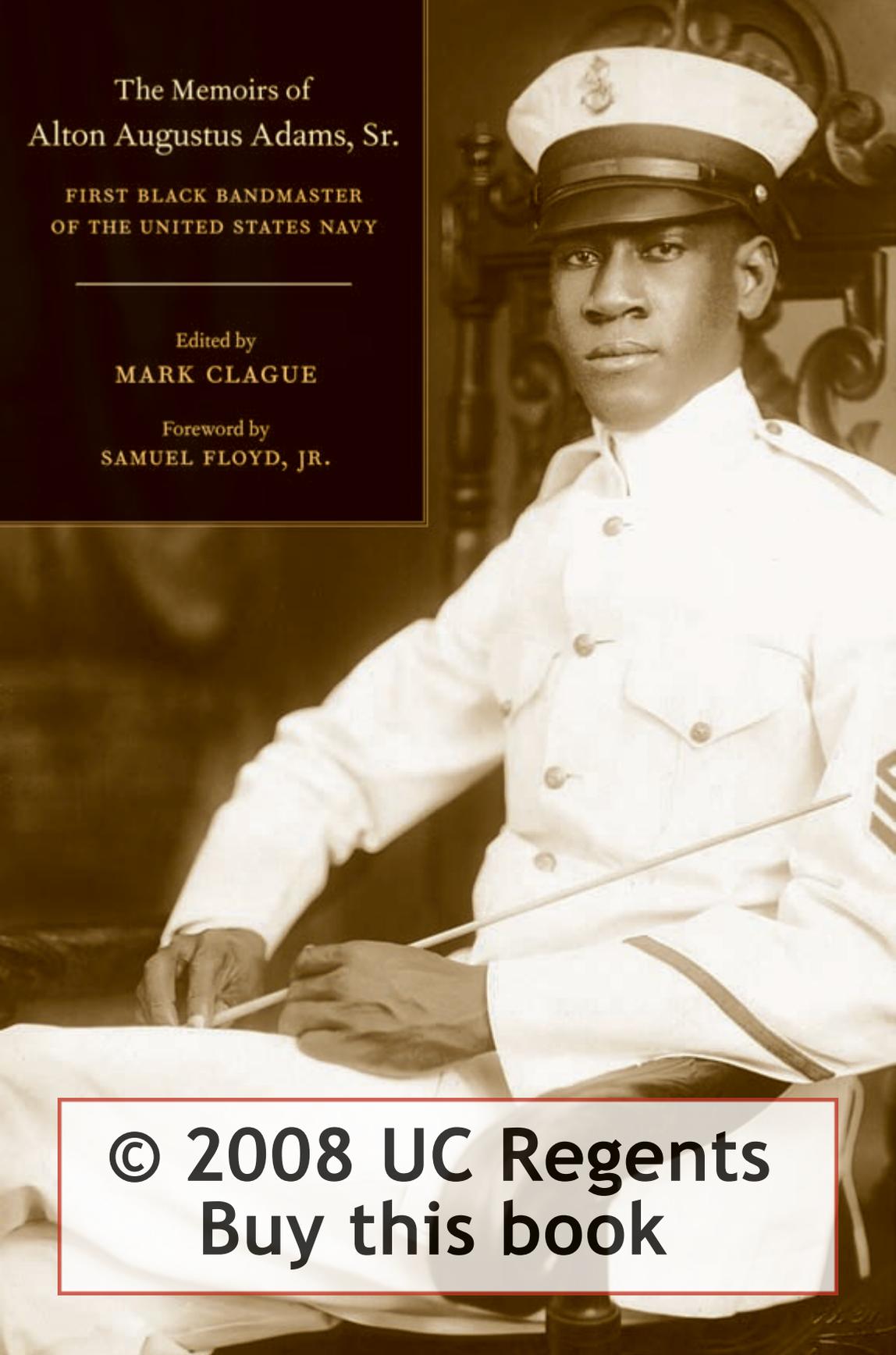


The Memoirs of
Alton Augustus Adams, Sr.

FIRST BLACK BANDMASTER
OF THE UNITED STATES NAVY

Edited by
MARK CLAGUE

Foreword by
SAMUEL FLOYD, JR.



**© 2008 UC Regents
Buy this book**

University of California Press, one of the most distinguished university presses in the United States, enriches lives around the world by advancing scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its activities are supported by the UC Press Foundation and by philanthropic contributions from individuals and institutions. For more information, visit www.ucpress.edu.

Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are courtesy of the Alton Adams Family Trust.

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

Center for Black Music Research
Columbia College Chicago

© 2008 by The Regents of the University of California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Adams, Alton A.

The memoirs of Alton Augustus Adams, Sr.: first black bandmaster of the United States Navy / edited by Mark Clague ; foreword by Samuel Floyd, Jr.

p. cm. — (Music of the African diaspora ; 12)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 978-0-520-25131-1 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Adams, Alton A. 2. Bandmasters— Virgin Islands of the United States— Biography. 3. Virgin Islands of the United States— Social conditions— 20th century. I. Clague, Mark, [date]. II. Title.

ML422.A245A3 2008

784.092— dc22

2007012025

Manufactured in the United States of America

17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on NaturesBook, which contains 50% post-consumer waste and meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

1 A Historical Memoir

Editor's Note: In this opening chapter, Adams reveals the memoirs to be a response to a Virgin Islands "identity crisis" left in the wake of racial pressures from the U.S. mainland as well as the islands' own continuing economic struggles. With the Virgin Islands facing a "critical crossroad" in their history, Adams's prescription is a return to three local and traditional values he credits in part to the Danish past: discipline, a vibrant cosmopolitan culture, and tolerance. Instilled by the apprenticeship system and by community and family cohesion, and enforced by law, discipline was fostered in the islands by the structures of daily life. According to Adams, cosmopolitanism resulted from trade that nurtured the free exchange of people and ideas as well as goods, producing local thinkers and leaders with a broad perspective. This cosmopolitanism produced a tolerance of other ways of living that encouraged racial cooperation. Certainly, racism was present in the islands, but Adams experienced a tolerant, open society without institutionalized racial barriers. More than the seas and glorious flora, Adams credits these values with giving the Virgin Islands their distinctive beauty. As one of the few remaining culture bearers of the nineteenth-century Danish West Indian experience, Adams wishes to instill these fading values in the contemporary youth of the community through his historical reminiscences. Thus, his book is a social tool for shaping the self-concept of Virgin Islanders and preserving the strengths Adams feels are central to his islands' future.

I have undertaken to write this historical memoir at the insistence of many friends and relatives and because of a deeply rooted sense of responsibility to younger generations of Virgin Islanders seeking knowledge about their past and a more meaningful understanding of their distinct cultural heritage.

This book makes no claim to being a comprehensive history of the Virgin Islands, an endeavor for which I readily admit I lack both the training and time to write. Instead, it seeks to provide glimpses and insights into our history and culture through a recording of my own experiences and reflections.

I believe such a book to be both timely and necessary. Guided by a lifelong dedication to the cultural enrichment of my people, I am convinced that they have reached a critical crossroad in their historical and personal development. People, especially the youth of these islands, seem confused and uncertain about themselves—about their past, their present, and their future. They have begun to ask important, fundamental questions. What is a Virgin Islander? What, if anything, makes us unique? What is the meaning of our history and its relevance to the present? Do we possess a distinctive culture? If so, what part of it is worthy of preservation? And how can our culture help us improve the present and serve as a guide to the future? These are indeed profound and difficult questions that all of us collectively must confront and answer if we want to continue on the pathway of progress.

Through this memoir I want to record and document my personal conviction that the way out of this modern dilemma, this "identity crisis," does not lead through a remote African past, nor through the uncritical emulation of Danish rule, nor the humanistic influence of the Moravian and Catholic Churches, nor the historical position of the Virgin Islands as an entrepôt of world trade. My own experience is that under Danish sovereignty considerable racial mobility existed, racial discrimination and prejudice were held within tolerable limits, and blacks not only had easy access to an international culture but also played a significant role in enriching its content. In 1917 America inherited this tradition of racial democracy on the islands, recognized its value, and took steps to further its development.

Only in the past few years has this pattern of racial harmony and understanding been disrupted under the impact of change and modernization. This new racism is inimical to the character and heritage of Virgin Islanders, as well as to the institutional network of our society. Yet, unfortunately, its influence is spreading. If we are to retain that tolerant and humanistic spirit bequeathed to us by our ancestors and our cultural traditions, then we must take immediate steps to check the further development of this racist cancer by elaborating and instituting a comprehensive program of controlled development and cultural revitalization that will mesh traditional virtues, values, and attitudes with newer demands for material prosperity and greater control over local conditions. To my mind, far too much attention is paid today to purely materialistic demands. There is a

corresponding need for spiritual uplift and rejuvenation. I hope to redress the current imbalance toward materialism by reminding my people of the intrinsic worth of older values and customs, by pointing out their relevance for present concerns, and by stressing the urgent need for their future preservation.

Much of what is best about our culture and ourselves derives from the period of Danish rule, 1672 to 1917. Danish rule had its good and bad points. It is not my intention to make a comprehensive assessment of either in this memoir. Suffice it to say, however, that those who condemn the Danes out of hand show a poor appreciation of their positive contributions to the unique cultural heritage and value system of Virgin Islanders. To my mind three attributes are particularly worthy of being singled out as constituting beneficial legacies of Danish rule: a strong sense of discipline, a cosmopolitan culture of high refinement, and a social atmosphere and cast of mind free of invidious racial distinctions and prejudices.

The discipline of which I speak carried no connotations of severity, unreasonable curtailment of freedom, or arbitrary or unjust demands of authority. It meant a voluntary adherence by the individual to a time-tested set of rules judged best suited to govern relations between individual members of the social body so as to protect and promote the interest of the whole. Embedded in this concept of discipline are the old-time virtues of respect, thrift, cleanliness, dependability, honesty, integrity, common decency, and a general respect for the rights and persons of others. These virtues, rigidly upheld by Danish administrators as beacon lights to common unity aspiration and behavior, were inculcated into the individual by way of the home, the church, the school, and the apprenticeship system.

This type of discipline was the order of the day years ago. The outstanding demeanor and general hospitality of St. Thomians was a source of personal and civic pride. Drunkenness and rowdiness were uncommon, even among the so-called lower orders. Charles Edwin Taylor, a prescient observer of St. Thomas in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, recorded that "the very coalwom en, whose lives are the most laborious, are as orderly and decent a people for the class to which they belong as you would meet anywhere in the world!"* Cleanliness, whether in the person or community, was an ingrained characteristic. The daily bath was a rigidly enforced imperative in family life. The homes of even the most indigent,

* Charles Edwin Taylor, *St. Thomas, as a Naval and Coaling Station* (St. Thomas, D. W. I.: J. N. Lightbourne, 1891). [These footnotes were written by Adam S. Hines; editorial notes are presented at the back of the book. — Editor]

though sparsely decorated, were kept immaculately clean inside and out. No litter law existed, for inner pride prevented even the humblest persons from discarding refuse about the street or in their yards.

"The Danes," one local has observed, "taught one to know his place, to respect his superiors, and to behave with good manners!"* Indeed, it paid off to be decent and well behaved under Danish rule. The Danes frowned on loafers and beggars and enacted strict vagrancy laws to deal with them. The law stipulated that some kind of work be found for those unwilling to find jobs on their own. The few criminals were quickly apprehended and severely dealt with. Strict measures were adopted to insure respectable and lawful behavior on the part of the youth. A nightly curfew was imposed to keep young people off the streets and out of trouble, while a complaint by a respectable citizen against boisterous behavior might lead to a public whipping by the Danish authorities. The whipping was, in fact, seldom employed. Its mere threat was sufficient deterrent to compel respectful and orderly behavior.

A thorough and effective apprenticeship system helped instill discipline. Boys had to apprentice themselves to a master craftsman in the hours after school, while girls received their training at home, learning such feminine pursuits as sewing, cooking, painting, or how to work in the lace and hardanger industry, which was prominent at that time.¹ The boss, or master craftsman, wielded as much influence over his apprentices as did a child's parents, who themselves kept a close watch over the activities and behavior of their children. Whether apprentices intended to follow the trade in later life was as not as important a consideration as the fact that the apprenticeship system kept young people off the streets and out of trouble, teaching them the values of the craft system. This compulsory placement of children in some sort of regularized work situation paid off handsomely. Not only did it provide skills with which to earn a decent living, but it also instilled a sense of personal pride, for in those days skillful work with the hands was not considered menial or degrading, but dignified and useful. In fact, tradespeople were among the leading representatives of that vibrant cultural life of which we boast today.

The noted French writer Romain Rolland said that the political life of a nation is only the most superficial aspect of its being, and that in order to know its interior life, it is necessary to penetrate to its soul through literature, philosophy, and the arts— for in these are reflected the ideas, the pas-

*Quoted in Albert A. Campbell, "St. Thomas Negroes: A Study of Personality and Culture," *Psychological Monographs* 55:5 (1943):49.

sions, and the dreams of a whole people. Culture is the word generally used to describe that interior life of a nation mentioned by Rolland. As the word culture conveys several meanings and is thereby subjected to different interpretations, it is necessary to clarify its meaning as used in this memoir.

The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines culture as follows:

The quality in a person or society that arises in an acquaintance with what is generally regarded as excellent in arts, letters, manners, scholarly pursuits . . . that which is excellent in arts, letters, manners . . . a particular form or stage of civilization as that of certain nations or periods; the sum total of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another . . .

Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary defines it as:

Tillage, cultivation, training, or discipline by which man's moral and intellectual nature is elevated, the result of such training, enlightenment, civilization, refinement.

Matthew Arnold, the famous writer, defines the word as "to know the best that has been said and thought."² The archbishop of the West Indies, Dr. Alan John Knight, in referring to Premier Forbes Burnham's plan to make obeah a part of Guyana's culture, said:

The word culture is fashionable now, but it is a silly word to use in this context because no one knows exactly what it signifies. By derivation the word must mean something that grows, and seemingly it could hardly be applied to a moribund relic of a bygone age of illiteracy and ignorance.³

The definition of the word culture, as used in this work, must not be construed as something static or immobile or that which can be taught or attained merely by pursuing courses in schools. Rather, it is that which must be developed from within and comes most forcibly by contact with and receptiveness to people (the cultured and the refined) whose high intellectual attainments are then absorbed into the spiritual substance and bloodstream, as it were, of one's being. In the Virgin Islands of my youth, the evidence of this civilized stage of development was discernible in the higher-ups as well as those in the ordinary, humble walks of life.

In the early days of our islands' history, when there was no mad rush after political power and bureaucratic sinecures, there lived a number of men and women who could well be regarded as the embodiment of culture and refinement. Without the advantages of higher education, these people industriously worked out their own enlightenment by private reading,

study, association with others, and a judicious use of their spare time. In consequence, they attained a very high level of cultural understanding and discourse. Most homes contained bookcases filled with the works of the great writers of Western literature— Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, William Shakespeare, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Miguel de Cervantes, and so many others.⁴ Not only did the Bible occupy the most respected position on the shelves, but its words were constantly read and understood. The daily conversations of those ancestors proved that they not only read these works but also digested their contents. Equally, in their music, our forebears showed a distinct appreciation of a variety of musical forms and idioms, from Johann Sebastian Bach's masses and Ludwig van Beethoven's symphonies to the lyrical habañera rhythms of our Cuban neighbors and social dances like the waltz or schottische, as well as local bamboulas.

The native Virgin Islander encompasses in his person a communion blending of many cultures and influences, aptly described by one writer as Spanish upon English upon Dutch upon Danish, like a layer cake with an American icing on top as an embellishment. It is the Virgin Islander's particular genius to absorb the best of other cultures and then adapt these influences to his or her own environment and situation.

The key to understanding the cultural history of St. Thomas can be found in the island's unique position as a commercial center of international significance. Only during the first sixty years of Danish rule was St. Thomas anything like an agricultural colony. Unlike St. Croix, where sugar cultivation prospered into the twentieth century, the rugged terrain and limited land area of St. Thomas made crop production a costly enterprise. After the acquisition of St. Croix in 1733, the Danish gradually allowed St. Thomas to develop into a free port. During the next century and a half, St. Thomas served as a vital trade emporium and communications center. Few ships from Europe or North America sailed Caribbean waters without entering the bustling port of Charlotte Amalie.

Along with the free circulation of goods went the free circulation of ideas. Businessmen of the more progressive European and American nations who flocked to the island to take advantage of opportunities offered by its central geographical location and tax-free port facilities brought with them a culture and refinement that soon permeated the entire community. Not only businessmen but also musicians, artists, scientists, writers, and actors of distinction regularly visited us, graced our concert halls, lived, and married among us. Each group brought to an increasingly receptive community its distinctive aspect of civilization— indeed a priceless treasure and heritage.

It should never be forgotten that St. Thomas, though a tiny spot on the map, once served as a social forge in which many heterogeneous groups were welded into a vibrant, functional entity whose underlying standard was unity in diversity. The central geographical location of the islands, their strategic importance under the benign administration of the Danes, and their cosmopolitan spirit generated a broad humanistic outlook among the inhabitants that had its highest expression in a tolerant approach to the question of race.

Some nonresident writers, most notably Albert Angus Campbell, who spent only a few short months in St. Thomas, have exaggerated the extent of racism and racial prejudice in the Danish West Indies. That some sort of prejudice and discrimination existed cannot be denied. But what was unique about Danish colonial rule was the relative absence of racial disharmony and discriminatory legislation. Social and political considerations, not racism, underlay the few discriminatory laws governing the free people of color during the first century and a half of Danish rule. In the nineteenth century, manumission [the freeing of slaves by their owners] was encouraged, the free colored were granted full rights of citizenship, and career opportunities gradually were opened to men of talent regardless of race.

The Danes set the example by mingling with the Negro upper classes, taking Negro mistresses, and sometimes even marrying Negroes. After 1848, the Danes even appointed qualified Negroes to the Colonial Councils. The absence of prejudice in both law and social behavior never failed to impress discerning foreign visitors. In 1877, for example, the American consul informed the secretary of state that

no distinction is made by the government on account of race or color. The races intermingle and mingle together in all public places and are associated in business.*

Subsequent visitors have marveled at the prevailing atmosphere of racial harmony. Permit me to quote at length from two such persons of different races, from different countries with different backgrounds, who visited the islands in 1962 for two different purposes.

The late Evelyn Marvel, a veteran Paris correspondent for Universal Service, Newark Evening News, and the Paris edition of the New York Herald Tribune, as well as the author of a number of books, writes:

*U.S. Consular Dispatches, St. Thomas 1804-1906, V.V. Smith to F.W. Seward, Nov. 1, 1877 (Dept. of State microfilm).

Since the capital of St. Thomas was the most important slave market in the whole Caribbean area, and the local merchant and plantation owner naturally had first choice of the auction block, the Virgin Islander can claim with some reason that his forefathers were the most distinguished of the captured—tribal chieftains and those of outstanding intelligence, as well as the best physical specimens.

The Virgin Islander is a quietly proud man, and being in the majority and not subject to the indignities of the continental Negro, he lacks racial bias. Indeed, one charming elderly gentleman confided to me that colored visitors from the states frequently distressed them with talk of racial problems. Here, he said, "we have none."⁵ This commendable state of affairs has not been mentioned in anything I have read on the Virgin Islands, but it is quite as significant as their natural beauty and Danish architecture. So important does it seem to me that I believe it is best explained in terms of personal experience.

It happens that I had met only a few Negroes on a social basis, and although I like to think myself devoid of racial prejudice, I found little common ground with those I had encountered. Secretly I had felt self-conscious, as if I must prove my sympathy for them. In the Virgin Islands this subconscious reaction was nonexistent.

Prior to my visit I had been told that the population was "mainly colored." But I was still not prepared for the impact of a society composed of an entirely different race. It had not occurred to me that this referred to all social strata, and that the most cultivated group I would meet would be men and women of color. I went open minded, but knowing no one. By the time I left, I had formed several cherished friendships. I met a number of white residents, but for the highlights of my stay I am indebted to the true Virgin Islander, with his kindness and courtesy. What I most appreciated was that they made no distinction about me, or the shade of my skin. We met on the common ground of mutual interests. They assisted me in the garnering of facts, lent me rare and precious books for historical research—greatest of all, they opened their homes to me and accepted me into their midst.

Theirs is a life completely lacking in racial hostility. . . . It was an atmosphere that I had never before breathed, one which gave me confidence in the brotherhood of man.*

At a press conference held at St. Thomas's Government House for Sylvanus Olympio, later president of the African Republic of Togo, during his visit in 1952, which he described as pleasant, profitable, gratifying, and instructive, he said:

* Evalyn Marvel, *Guide to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1960; rev., 1963), 161-62.

I have been very impressed with the friendliness of the people here. Everyone seems to be very cheerful and, what is more, there is a racial harmony which you don't see very much in this part of the world and that has greatly impressed me, and I have been trying to find out how they have been able to do that, because it should be an example to many other parts of the world.

As you are no doubt aware, the racial problem is a very acute one in some parts of the world, and if in any particular corner this can be solved in such a friendly atmosphere and that every one is so happy about, it is a thing we should all learn from that particular place.⁶

I believe the attributes of discipline, culture, and racial harmony to be among our finest qualities as a people. Yet today these qualities are in danger of eradication by mindless barbarians whose violent actions and alien beliefs threaten the fabric of our community. Although their rhetoric is one of cultural pride, they are in fact betrayers of our most fundamental values and beliefs. I can only hope that this memoir will stimulate Virgin Islanders, particularly the younger people, to undertake a wider study and deeper reflection into their historical and cultural background. It is a background of which they can be justifiably proud and that is worth passing on to their children. Yet only to the extent that they can appreciate and perpetuate the underlying humanistic values of their rich cultural heritage can they truly claim to be worthy upholders of our ancestors' enlightened traditions.

It is my deep conviction that the true charm of these islands lies less in their physical beauty, great as it may be, than in the warmth, hospitality, dignity, generosity, and common decency of their people. If, acting together as one people, we can convince ourselves, as well as the outside world, of that fundamental truth, then we can look to our past with veneration, to our present with pride, and to our future with hopeful anticipation.