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The Abolition of Slavery in the British West Indies; The Case of Barbados

Bruce Taylor

In June of 1833, the British Parliament passed an act to abolish slavery within the imperial system. While this was the beginning of a profound legal revolution in the British West Indies, it was a logical result of a series of reforms by Parliament in response to a relentless drive by abolitionist forces and a corresponding loss of political influence by the West Indian planters. The planters were able only to salvage a cash payment as compensation for their loss of property and a period of adjustment euphemistically called "apprenticeship."

The sixty-six articles of the Abolition Act scheduled to take effect on August 1, 1834, provided that the former slaves were to be either given immediate freedom, or, as it happened in nearly all cases, turned into "apprentices." There were three classifications: (1) Agricultural workers who normally were employed in field labor were termed "predial," that is attached to the land as bonded servants, and were required to serve until 1840 when full freedom would be granted; (2) rural apprentices who worked on estates other than their master's were also to serve until 1840; and (3) apprentices who did not work in the fields such as domestic servants or artisans were called "non-predial" and were to serve only until August 1, 1838.¹

Barbados, therefore, had a period of time between 1834 and 1840 to take full advantage of a captive labor supply but unless something miraculous happened would then have to make the adjustment to a free labor system.

It is interesting to see the process of adjustment on the part of local leadership as a determined parent government, in this case Great Britain, legislated social and economic change. Barbados, it should be noted, had its own self-governing institutions although checked by a Crown-appointed governor armed with a suspensive veto and some patronage power. Legislation passed by Parliament came to Barbados requiring a separate bill passed by the island legislature and then approval by the Crown. This long standing procedure combined with planter domination of all of the other institutions on the island made the Barbadian leadership extremely resistant to any threat to their autonomy or to what they considered literally and figuratively their own business. There is also the question of the extent to which the planter class could make the adjustment in its set of attitudes toward the black population. The mind of the slaveholder contained a set of self-justifying reconstructions of the society he controlled. He had to view himself not as a cruel exploiter of captive men but rather as a civilizer of the savage, the protector of the morally and intellectually

inferior and the organizer of that economic activity without which the whole noble enterprise collapsed. Further, as loyal subject of the Crown, he saw himself enhancing the greatness of England as he provided revenue for the state, employment for Englishmen and income for the merchants. Slavery, of course, was a paradox whose ultimate contradictions and dilemmas were difficult to ignore. The slave was a man and a thing at the same time. The slave was a piece of property but human enough to exploit sexually. He was less than human, however, when it came to marriage for that would have meant the right to enter into contracts, control property and, more significantly, approach closer to the planter in status. And now, the slave, the inferior man-thing, had suddenly been legitimized as a man and raised to the rank of subject-citizen.

Having accepted the apprenticeship and its implications the Barbadians now had to brace themselves for yet another attack by the abolitionist forces. By 1836 the anti-slavery groups were again mounting a major offensive against the West Indian planters following reports of injustices and atrocities committed under the apprenticeship program. Several abolitionists decided to tour the colonies in order to discover the actual conditions there and to compile evidence to use in the battle for an early end to apprenticeship and establishment of full emancipation.

On the return of the abolitionists to England in 1837, the early emancipation effort gained momentum. On May 19, 1837, the House of Commons ordered that a committee be established to study the apprenticeship system. It met from May 23 to July 10, but its report was delayed because of the death of William IV. The committee stated that although little progress had been made, enough material had come in on the state of penal institutions, especially in Jamaica, to warrant further investigation. During the summer and fall, the abolitionists continued to pressure Parliament urging the members to fix August 1, 1838 as the date on which all apprentices should receive their freedom. Lord Glenelg at the Colonial Office resisted the flood of petitions, however. On the 27th of November, he told Lord Grey to state that he,

after an anxious and minute attention during the last two years and a half to the details of this subject, and after a careful consideration of all the information respecting it to which His Lordship had access, does not feel that there are sufficient grounds to justify her Majesty's Government in proposing to Parliament to make so essential an alteration in the Act of 1833 as that which is desired by the memorialists.²

The opposition redoubled their efforts, leading the West India Body of Planters and Merchants to issue a defense on January 10, 1838, stating that the labor given by the apprentices was part of the compensation due the planters under the terms of the 1833 Abolition Act. Any attempt to end that labor service would be in violation of that Act. They mentioned that, although the charges of cruelty were unfounded, they would not oppose a measure to insure planter compliance with existing regulations. The statement also said that the freeing of so many people to full citizen-

ship all at once would be a historical first and that there was not enough time to prepare for this.³

While the Government's position should have been somewhat heartening to the planters, their sense of security was short-lived. On February 20, 1838, Lord Brougham gave an inspired address describing the horrors of apprenticeship and called for an end to it by August 1. Glenelg rose in reply, defending apprenticeship in general, saying that the slaves were better off. A sudden emancipation, moreover, would be dangerous to all concerned. The Government would, however, bring in a bill to redress the grievances of the apprentices. The result was that Brougham lost his motion, thirty-one to seven.⁴

While this seemed to be a pro-planter position on the part of Lord Glenelg, he soon revealed that abolitionist pressure had forced a change in the Government's position. On February 27, Glenelg, in the House of Lords, charged that

... nothing was to be hoped for from the Colonial Assemblies, but everything from the British Parliament, that punishment was inflicted on the apprenticed labourer under pretence of discipline, but in reality from a motive of vengeance, because the negro was no longer a slave; that convicts for life who had lost every principle of honour, and who had no refuge left from the stings of their own conscience, had been selected to execute the ungenerous revenge of the former slave-owners; and that the evil feelings generated by a long course of wickedness still rankled in the breasts of the oppressors, who now had recourse to worse instruments than they had ever employed in the height of their most licentious barbarity.⁵

Lord Glenelg was justifying the Government's announced bill to amend the Abolition Act so that restrictive measures could be applied to the apprenticeship systems, but seems to have had Jamaica particularly in mind when he made his rather caustic statement. The Barbadians felt that they had been unjustly included in the broad denunciation made by Glenelg.⁶ R. Bowcher Clarke, the Solicitor General, made a reply to the Glenelg charges in which he quoted a Glenelg dispatch which praised Barbadians for their cooperative spirit in passing legislation in conformity with the intent of Parliament and said that Barbadians conducted their discussions with dignity and restraint, which gave "just representations" of the rationale of the Ministry even when that opinion was in direct opposition to their own.⁷ This was in the fall of 1835, after Barbados had finally managed to amend their version of the Abolition Act to the satisfaction of the Crown. But even though the Glenelg praise amounted to probably little more than the usual courtesy, it must be admitted that the Barbadians did have justice on their side in complaining about the sweeping language used by Glenelg in his recent attack.

Unwarranted or not, it would seem that the toughening stance of the Home Government did speed up the process of emancipation in Barbados, even though Schomburgk reported that Clarke claimed that he had had the idea before any pressure was brought to bear. Clarke said, in a speech in the Barbadian Assembly, "It is

my deliberate conviction that this House should lose no time in providing for the complete emancipation of the apprenticed laborers on the 1st of August next."⁸ He then added that "this opinion . . . is not the opinion of today, I have entertained it for months past, and the time has arrived when I feel I must act on it."⁹ On May 15, 1838, following the appointment of a committee to draft the legislation, a bill was introduced and passed both branches of the island legislature calling for the end of apprenticeship on August 1. Governor Evan MacGregor approved it the next day. The emancipation bill itself, in addition to granting complete freedom, made it unlawful for estate owners to eject workers from the plantations before the first of November as long as they were willing to perform labor services in return for stated wages and if they behaved properly. It also required the planters to provide for those who could not work because of disease or other infirmity for the rest of their lives or until the state assumed the burden, unless they had relatives of the first degree able to take care of them. If the latter were the case, the planter obligation would stop at the end of a year's time on August 1, 1839.¹¹

Despite Sir Robert Schomburgk's account of Barbadian willingness to cooperate and, in fact, take the initiative in ending the apprenticeship, a closer examination of the evidence indicates that the planters were by no means willing to end the era before Glenelg made his admittedly obnoxious charges and additional pressure was applied by Great Britain. Governor MacGregor had, according to Joseph Sturge, confided on January 3, 1837, that he personally, was in favor of immediate emancipation but that the planters were not ready to accept that and must, therefore, be conciliated and persuaded to be on good terms with their workers.¹² A year later, however, the Governor mentioned to Lord Glenelg that, although he had tried to encourage the legislature on January 16, 1838 to end the apprenticeship, he found resistance to the idea very firm. When news of the second reading of the British bill to improve the legal protection of the apprentices reached the island, however, MacGregor said that his bargaining position increased.¹³ Evidently the planters, even though they felt they were not as flagrant in their abuses of the system as their Jamaican friends, the threat of increased meddling in their internal affairs by the British Government was enough to make them reconsider.

In the course of the discussion in the Assembly on the proposed legislation, the opposition forces made their arguments on the basis of constitutional and property rights and on the grounds that the apprenticeship was going well with respect to economic considerations. It was suggested that Barbados could not on its own authority abolish the Abolition Act, but must wait for an act of Parliament.¹⁴ While this was perhaps not a serious point, it would appear that more fundamental issues were raised. It was declared that the Assembly had no right to vote away the property of its constituents, that the apprenticeship was going well, that the island was prosperous, and that "the contented cheerful conduct of the apprentices and their rapidly improving condition" were reason enough to continue the system. Confidence was also expressed that the Lords' bill would constitute no real threat to the island,

since the measures it described for the improvement of the system were already being put into practice on Barbados.

Meanwhile, pressure continued on Glenelg at home. Far from being impressed by the Ministry's effort to more tightly control the apprenticeship program, the abolitionists were prepared to introduce a bill to put an end to the apprenticeship.¹⁶ During March, the bishops of London and Exeter stated their support for abolition.¹⁷

The Home Government was able to turn back the abolitionists and pass its own bill on April 9, 1838, calling for closer regulation.¹⁸ The West Indies were now confronted with two hostile forces: an aroused public opinion urging immediate end to apprenticeship and a ministry unwilling to abandon its apprenticeship program and, yet, now willing to launch an inquiry into existing practices and to legislate tighter controls over what the colonial assembly felt to be matters of purely local control.

When news of the final passage of the act amending the Abolition Act arrived from Lord Glenelg on April 16, MacGregor reported that a fear existed in Barbados of publishing the Act, since labor unrest might follow. Misunderstanding has caused an 1816 slave rising, and such could occur again. MacGregor said he could withhold it if the legislature would pass a quick end to the apprenticeship. He suggested June 20, since it was the anniversary of the Queen's coronation. The Assembly, upset at British harassment, would not go that far; but, the next day, the idea of ending the apprenticeship received favorable response in both houses.¹⁹ Members cited the strength of British public opinion, as well as the good faith of the British in not directly intervening to end the apprenticeship. Also mentioned was the good conduct, generally, of the workers and their readiness for freedom. Perhaps reflecting the fear of unrest, they also stated that it would not be in the best interests of the colony now to grant that freedom.²⁰ The concern for security of the planters was also revealed in their decision not to promulgate the "Act to Amend the Act for the Abolition of Slavery" until May 29, a full two weeks after they passed their act to end the apprenticeship.²¹ The planters appeared to have granted their own "gift" to the workers before Great Britain's Act had surfaced.

In the course of debate, the Lord Bishop of Barbados, William Coleridge, contributed another compelling reason for ending the apprenticeship. He noted that other islands were considering this action and he did not want to see Barbados lag behind. He also noted that Antigua, which had adopted freedom in 1834, was progressing well. Barbados, moreover, enjoyed an advantage over that island in its greater volume of commerce and should not fear economic decline.²²

While the immediate pressures from Great Britain seemed to be the most significant factor at work in the decision by the Barbadians to opt for freedom for their labor force in 1838, there is evidence that some planters may indeed have been convinced, along with Governor MacGregor, that full freedom should have been proclaimed at an earlier date. James Thome and Horace J. Kimball interviewed one Stipendiary Magistrate who said he knew "quite a number" of planters who were

ready to emancipate the apprentices in 1836, but were waiting for a major move by others.²³ Many hoped that the legislature would at least free all apprentices by 1838.²⁴ Mr. Jones, the Superintendent of Rural Police, according to Thome and Kimball, said he expected all workers to be freed by 1838.²⁵

The view that 1838 might be a desirable time to switch to a free labor system was probably based to a large extent on the fact that non-predials or domestics would receive their freedom on August 1 of that year. Many saw difficulty in freeing perhaps 15,000 apprentices while the rest had to serve two more years. Also, the term, "non-predial" was not precise in its meaning. Tradesmen who worked on estates were considered predial, yet "mechanics" were non-predial. If the category were to include all those not engaged in agricultural labor, it would be more consistent. Such ambiguity would be likely to spark resentment among those who would be denied their freedom based on local interpretation of the law. The law, in fact, was changed by the Government in a circular from Lord Glenelg in March of 1838.²⁶

It might be noted, however, that there seemed to be a growing trend toward manumissions, which might seem to indicate a planter desire to make a gradual transition to free labor. Under the law, masters were required to allow former slaves to purchase their freedom, and many hired themselves out at rates varying from one half to one dollar a week in order to gain enough money to purchase freedom. While those who were successful were mostly non-predial, it nevertheless contributed to the softening of the system.²⁷ Sturge and Harvey quoted one magistrate who claimed he had been averaging thirty manumissions a month.²⁸ The returns for 1835, from April to about October, indicate a total of 134 apprentices earning their freedom.²⁹

Another reason suggested for planter willingness to legislate an early end to the apprenticeship was to gain the gratitude of the estate worker.³⁰ However, the Barbadian Assembly resisted efforts to bestow the gift of freedom until the accepted date of August 1, 1838, even though other colonies were doing it and despite the fact that some planters were granting freedom on an individual basis.

Some of the renewed concern for emancipation might have come in response to the May 29 publication of the tighter regulations on apprenticeship. Important changes included a guarantee of Saturday and Sunday freedom to the workers and the inclusion of the time spent traveling to and from work in the nine hours' obligation each day. Whatever the cause, a petition was sent, shortly after, to the Assembly from nineteen estate managers, urging an early end to the apprenticeship. Another petition arrived from twenty-two non-resident planters urging similar action. Also, the Codrington estates, owned by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and guided closely by Bishop Coleridge, declared their workers free as of May 30, 1838.³¹ On June 5, however, the Council declared that it would not press the issue, since any measure calling for freedom at that time would have failed in the Assembly. The Council wanted to avoid what it termed a "collision," noting that times were too tense for such an issue.³²

Still, even though the Assembly was unwilling to enact legislation as a public relations effort to show the blacks they were interested in their welfare, individual planters continued to emancipate their workers. The Inspector of Rural Police on June 6 reported that those who had been freed were giving no planter any trouble and expected more planters to follow the trend as soon as crop-time, which was late that year, ended.³³ The Governor, in a message to Glenelg on June 28, took note of the irony of the Assembly's failure to pass an earlier emancipation law by which many employers were avoiding the regulatory act by freeing their people. MacGregor lamented the intransigence of the Assembly in not taking the opportunity of improving the rapport with both Great Britain and the black population.³⁴ Despite the Governor's disappointment, enough of the planters saw the wisdom or necessity of acting promptly to swell the total number of manumissions by June 28 to 16,345,³⁵ which represented about twenty per cent of the total. Such a large number being already free must have gone a long way toward lessening the emotional impact of August 1 on the black population. As the Inspector of Rural Police mentioned in his report on June 6, the voluntary manumissions, if done on a large scale, would prevent any "cause for excitement at any one particular period."³⁶ Many planters could then claim that it was not the British Government, nor even the Barbadian government, that gave their workers their freedom and thus gain a psychological advantage as the era of free labor approached. Yet, despite the trend toward voluntary emancipation, it seemed that the island was extremely tense as August 1 drew ever nearer.

The Governor, the planters, and the religious establishment leaders of the island all shared the common concern that the workers would not continue in their basic role in society once emancipation had been granted, and they even worried that the news of a change in the British Abolition Act, and talk of a still earlier end to apprenticeship, would cause a major problem on the estates. Sensitivity on the part of the leadership was increased, moreover, since the crop season had not finished. On May 22, 1838, MacGregor issued a proclamation advising the workers that there was no hope for an earlier-than-August end to apprenticeship and that, should there be any trouble on this account, it would only work against their interests. This was meant to imply, probably, that the end to apprenticeship might not come even in August should the workers exhibit traits of character making them unworthy of full emancipation. In any event, the Governor warned the workers that when emancipation finally came they would be on their own and must, therefore, be prepared to work steadily to support themselves. He emphasized the worth and dignity of work—any work—even plantation work, stressing "that no employment . . . can be mean or dishonourable, or unworthy of a free man, which is honestly pursued in the fear of God and his commandments."³⁷ Workers would be wise to save money and join a friendly society in the neighborhood so that they would have a cash reserve in case of injury or illness. The implication obviously was made that the estate will not do anything for you, so you had better be prepared. The prospect of using island resources to aid the infirm could not be greeted with much enthusiasm either. He also warned that idle persons and robbers would be severely dealt with and each person had the duty of reporting crime and helping to keep the peace. And, finally,

there was an appeal to the basic tenets of Christianity as seen by the planter class. On the day of emancipation, all workers should go to church and give thanks for the gift and blessing of freedom. "Fear God and keep his commandments . . . For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil . . . Recompense to no man evil for evil . . . obey in all things your master. If any man provide not for his own . . . he is worse than an infidel. Train a child in the way he should go, and in his old age he will not depart from it." The message was clear. The planter ruled by divine right, idleness was sin, refusing to work was heresy, and failure to socialize children to the work cycle was neglect of parental duty. But *freedom* was a blessing! The inspector of rural police was quite impressed with the proclamation and thought each cottage on the island should have a copy.³⁸

Despite planter fears, the months of June and July passed peacefully enough, due in part perhaps to the voluntary manumissions and the realization on the part of the blacks that the system was in fact moving toward some kind of fundamental change and that this change was supported by the British Government. Meanwhile, planter preparations against that day of change continued. The legislature passed a series of repressive laws in an effort to markedly circumscribe the full exercise of freedom by the workers. Much of the legislation seemed to be based on precedents established in England, but in the colonies the laws could be enforced in such an arbitrary way that the effect was to go beyond the intent of the British legislation. Among the acts was included an effort to suppress vagrancy, rogues, and vagabonds. Mr. R. Bowcher Clarke, the Solicitor General, pointed out that the "respectable class of negroes" wanted strong laws against thieves, especially those who would steal in negro villages while the workers were in the fields. And he added, in what appears to be a barb aimed at Great Britain, that, while the act on which it was based on the home island allowed for corporal punishment, a previous law in Barbados forbid such penalties.³⁹ Lord Glenelg advised the colony that the Home Government could not approve the law, since it placed too much power in the hands of the local justices of the peace. These justices were too closely identified with planter interests, since they "have so recently stood in [such] a relation to the labouring class, which must for a time tend to produce in the mind of that class some degree of distrust and suspicion."⁴⁰

Barbados passed special legislation to prevent "Tumult and Riotous Assemblies" and for the swift punishment of offenders.⁴¹ It also authorized an increase in the number of rural constables. Under this act, the local planter could ask two justices of the peace in his area, who were presumably his close friends if not members of his family, to appoint two constables from laborers on his own estate if the total population was one hundred or more and one constable if the population was at least twenty-five. These constables were to aid the estate or parish and, under the command of the regular police, were to deal with any crime or disturbance. This special policeman was given an official "staff of office" at the district police station and the usual fees, but court appearance was not required unless he was especially summoned.⁴² The use of free blacks by planters for the defense of the island was

fairly common in the West Indies, but this seemed to be an effort not only to secure additional manpower, but also an attempt to co-opt a number of able blacks into supporting the system once apprenticeship ended. Since the word "labourer" is used in the act, the planter would probably not use his household servants and perhaps not even the specialized blacks employed as artisans and drivers.

On June 19, 1838, the Barbados assembly passed a comprehensive measure designed to further insure a continuous work force once full emancipation began. The "Act to regulate the Hiring of Servants, and for the more expeditious recovery of Wages by them" was a carefully prepared plan containing features which might be considered reasonable by those persons not fully knowledgeable of the Barbados situation. With respect to agreements between workers and employers, the law said that the normal term of a contract should be for one year unless specifically arranged for other than a year. For the planter this was a reasonable guarantee of steady labor, especially throughout the harvest season. In the absence of a credible witness to prove the existence of a written agreement, an implied contract existed if the worker remained for at least one week in the service of a planter. Each side could break the contract by giving at least one month's notice. In the case of sickness, the proprietor was allowed to cut off part of the wages of the worker but was liable to provide medical care. So as not to appear unduly favorable to the planter, the legislature included some machinery for the redress of grievances by both parties. If the worker committed acts of sabotage or refused to work, he was to be charged with a misdemeanor. If either party felt he had been wronged, two justices of the peace would hear disputes between planter and worker. In addition, there was the right of appeal to the Governor in Council sitting as a Court of Error. A further provision provided for a kind of informal arbitration procedure:

... to avoid litigation, and for the better preservation of harmony between masters and servants, it shall be lawful, when any disagreement shall arise between master and servant respecting wages, work, or any subject affecting their relationship of master and servant, in husbandry or manufacture, if the parties are willing to arbitrate the same, that they may appoint not less than four persons, nor more than six, to be mutually agreed upon, half master-employer, their agents and assistants, and half labourers or manufacturers, who, being sworn, shall have full power to hear and finally determine the question in dispute . . .⁴³

This arbitration, however, had to be requested within three days following the performance of the work under question, the negotiations could take no more than two days, and the justice of the peace would settle any dispute that could not be resolved.⁴⁴

Lord Glenelg was not impressed with the Act,⁴⁵ nor, could the workers have been enthusiastic. The central weakness of the Act in terms of its capability of insuring justice for the worker was in its reliance on the justice of the peace in most of the questions. The justice was not likely to bring action against his fellow planters on

behalf of their workers. As a matter of fact, there was no provision made for the justices to bring an action against a planter for refusal to pay wages or for any other misconduct toward the workers, whereas in the case of the worker any alleged work stoppage or breakage of some sort constituted a crime. The contract law was also arranged to take advantage of the worker. If, at the end of apprenticeship, the conscientious worker remained on the same estate for a week, he automatically entered into a binding agreement with the planter, the "breaking" of which constituted a crime. The only real chance for the worker to get beyond the local level was through an appeal to the Governor, which would take some time, trouble, and not a little knowledge of procedure. To undertake such an effort would have required legal advice which the planter was not under any obligation to provide free of charge. One other feature of the Act must be mentioned. It was unlawful for one planter to "seduce" a worker away from another estate. For each offense, there was a ten pound fine, plus the obligation to remit cash to the planter to cover the back wages of the worker. There was no remedy, of course, for the worker for his inconvenience.

Apparently only the threat of close Parliamentary supervision of estate practices prompted Barbadian planters to end the apprenticeship earlier than originally planned. Still, individual planters despite the legislative inaction, moved to free their own workers perhaps to gain a psychological advantage. But as apprenticeship finally ended, the Barbadians were adjusting their system to continue the economic and social domination of their labor. The network of law and force again was arranged to insure a continuous supply of labor.

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NOTES

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38. *Ibid.*
39. MacGregor to Glenelg, July 8, 1838, in *Ibid.*
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45. Glenelg to MacGregor, August 31, 1938, in *Ibid.*

