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The Legacies of Slavery and Emancipation: Jamaica in the Atlantic World

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The Legacy of Slavery: The World of Jamaican Apprentices

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Slavery did not come to an end in the Anglophone Caribbean in 1834. Although slaves were declared legally free on 1 August, they were obliged to serve a period of Apprenticeship to their former masters. From the point of view of the ex-slaves, Apprenticeship had a number of conditions: the most important was that they were legally obligated to work without compensation for their former masters for up to forty-five hours per week. Their term of continued compulsory labour depended on their status; former field slaves (praedials) were to be apprenticed for six years while skilled apprentices and domestics (non-praedials) were to be fully free after four years.¹

¹The most comprehensive treatment of Apprenticeship remains W.L. Burn, Emancipation and Apprenticeship in the British West Indies (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937). See also William A. Green, British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830-1865 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); Idem., "The Apprenticeship in British Guiana, 1834-1838", Caribbean Studies 9 (1969): 44-66; Thomas C. Holt, The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Douglas Hall, "The Apprenticeship Period in Jamaica, 1834-1838", Caribbean Quarterly 3 (December 1953): 142-66; and Swithin Wilmot, "Not 'Full Free': The Ex-Slaves and the Apprenticeship System in Jamaica, 1834-1838", Jamaica Journal 17 (1984): 2-10.

Thomas Holt has called the Apprenticeship “a half-way covenant”, since the relationship between the planter and the worker was much the same as slavery during part of the week while the remaining time was negotiable. In the case of Jamaica, where the Assembly stipulated that the apprentice should work forty and one-half hours, the planters were required to supply the customary rations and allowances they had provided during slavery. Beyond the time required by law for the apprentices to serve their former masters, ex-slaves were free to negotiate conditions of work and wages with their former masters or with another employer. They could also choose not to work at all.²

Apprenticeship offered the planters significant advantages. It provided them time to develop appropriate methods of labour management as well as to introduce new equipment in light of the ending of slavery. For the planters, the system of Apprenticeship was an additional form of compensation. In England and at the Colonial Office, Apprenticeship was also regarded as essential. New banking and legal structures were needed for a free system as well as time to prepare the ex-slaves for freedom. Missionaries would have additional time “to mould the thinking of the apprentices, to encourage habits of industry, to build churches, and to establish stable social patterns that would induce freedmen to remain in settled estate villages when the system ended”. As the Governor of Jamaica in 1834, Lord Sligo, put it in an address to the Apprentices, “you will be APPRENTICED to your former owners for a few years, in order to fit you all for freedom”.³

An additional mechanism was instituted to safeguard the apprentices. Special magistrates were appointed, largely from England, to adjudicate disputes between masters

²Holt, The Problem of Freedom, pp. 56-57.

³Green, British Slave Emancipation, p. 130; CO 137/192, Sligo to Stanley, private, 27 May 1834, no 19.

and their former slaves. The role of these magistrates was crucial, as planters and former slave owners were no longer empowered to punish their ex-slaves. In a further proclamation to the apprentices of Jamaica, Sligo advised them that “neither your master, your overseer, your book-keeper, your driver, nor any other person can strike you, or put you into the stocks, nor can you be punished at all, except by the order of a Special Magistrate”.⁴

The intent of those responsible for the establishment of the Apprenticeship system was clear. Above all, they sought to create the conditions which would “perpetuate the established order” while at the same time protecting the ex-slaves. Historians have discussed the institutional apparatus of Apprenticeship and, in particular, the role of the special magistrates. What is less obvious is the perspective of the apprentices themselves. While it is difficult to reconstruct their views, it is apparent from the actions of many apprentices that they strongly opposed Apprenticeship. In discussing their hostility to the system, it may be possible to suggest how the apprentices saw freedom rather than how others saw it for them.⁵

I Resistance to Apprenticeship

On at least one island in the Caribbean, St. Kitts, there were early signs of trouble even before the onset of Apprenticeship. There, the slaves indicated that they would resist Apprenticeship and would strike on 1 August. As they explained to the Lieutenant-Governor

⁴Supplement to The Royal Gazette, 16-23 August 1834, Proclamation: Sligo to the Newly Made Apprentices of Jamaica.

⁵Green, British Slave Emancipation, p. 130. A useful starting point to examine blacks' expectations of freedom is Woodville K. Marshall, “‘We be wise to many more tings’: Blacks' Hopes and Expectations of Emancipation”, in Hilary Beckles & Verene Shepherd, eds., Caribbean Freedom: Society and Economy from Emancipation to the Present (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1993), pp. 12-20.

of the island, J. Lyons Nixon, they would “only work for wages, and that they will dictate terms, being convinced from the King's Proclamation that they are to have unrestricted freedom on the 1st August next”.⁶

Elsewhere in the Caribbean, there were also serious difficulties among the apprentices. In Trinidad, the apprentices vowed to strike and reiterated some of the same themes as the apprentices in St. Kitts. The hostility towards Apprenticeship was equally strong in British Guiana. In Essequibo, one of the provinces of the colony, apprentices occupied a church and a church yard for three days from 9 August, flew flags and generally sought to encourage apprentices in the area to resist Apprenticeship.⁷

In Jamaica, the situation was also difficult. In the parish of St. Ann, apprentices went on strike, vowing not to work except for wages. One report claimed that the apprentices swore that “they will have their heads cut off, or shot, before they will be bound as apprentices”. As in other parts of the Caribbean, apprentices questioned whether the King could be responsible for the legislation or whether, instead, it emanated from Jamaica. They asked the authorities a series of rather telling questions:

1st. Is it the King's law? 2d. Would you swear that the King make it? 3d. Did not the Jamaica House make it? 4. Did not Lord Sligo put his name to it because he has slaves? 5. Could you swear it is the Law of Jesus Christ?⁸

There was another level of protest which was more generalised and more difficult to control. James Scott has described this behaviour of peasants in terms of “hidden transcripts”, using “foot-dragging” or “poaching” as part of an everyday form of resistance.

Apprentices in Jamaica employed such tactics. Governor Sligo commented on the reaction

⁶British Parliamentary Papers [hereafter PP], 1835, (278-2), vol. 50, Nixon to Stanley, 10 July 1834, no. 198.

⁷Supplement to the Royal Gazette, 13-20 Sept. 1834; PP, 1835 (278-I), 50: Smyth to Spring Rice, 9 Aug. 1834, no. 113; Smyth to Spring Rice, 12 October 1834, no. 3.

⁸Postscript to The Royal Gazette, 2-9 August 1834.

of many apprentices who were unhappy with the new system: they resorted to “turning out late, irregularity to work, and idling of time”. To some degree, these “delinquencies” were dealt with by the special magistrates, but there was the additional problem of what planters perceived as “insolence and insubordination”. The use of language was significant in this context; a special magistrate, E.D. Baynes, reported that the apprentice was “daily becoming more heedless of and more disrespectful to his manager”. According to Baynes, apprentices were no longer willing to accept the language of their former owners without an appropriate retort.⁹

The reaction of the apprentices in the first year of the Apprenticeship was highly revealing. It was clear that their image of freedom differed substantially from those of the policymakers in the Colonial Office as well as their former masters.

For the apprentices, and especially those who resisted the establishment of Apprenticeship, it was difficult to comprehend the new system. Like the apprentices in Trinidad, they felt that they needed no “apprenticeship”; they needed no training for freedom or for their work on the plantations. In fact, the nature of the slaves' own economy in the Caribbean, with its extensive provision-ground system and highly-developed markets, meant that slaves were probably better prepared for freedom than their former masters.¹⁰ At the onset of Apprenticeship, ex-slaves wanted to be fully free; they sought “unrestricted freedom” and not a system of forced labour, even for part of the week.

⁹James Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. xiii; CO 137/215, Sligo to Glenelg, 5 March 1836, no. 362, encl: Murchison to Nunes, 1 March 1835; PP, 1836, (166-I), vol. 48, Sligo to Glenelg, 2 April 1836, encl: Report of E.D. Baynes, 28 March 1836, p. 343.

¹⁰For an important collection on this theme, see Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds., The Slaves' Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1991).

II The Planters' Perspective

On the other hand, former masters saw Apprenticeship in a very different light. For many of them, the Apprenticeship system was part of their compensation; it was, for them, part of their payment for giving up their ownership of enslaved people. Many planters sought to extract the maximum amount of labour that was possible in this period and to deny the apprentices the indulgences and allowances that they had received during slavery.

In theory, according to the Abolition Act, the apprentices were allowed the same allowances they had received during slavery. But since many of these allowances were a matter of customary practice rather than based on legislative statute, a considerable number of masters withheld these allowances. For example, this meant that field labour gangs were denied water carriers, and field cooks for the gangs were removed. During slavery, mothers of six or more children were exempt from field labour, but in many places, this was stopped and these women were sent to work in the field. Similarly, aged and infirm former slaves who had also been exempt from field labour had to work in the fields. One of the stipendiary magistrates commented at length and bitterly about these policies:

This feeling has doubtlessly originated in a splenetic and exasperated feeling on the part of the planters, who, compelled to emancipate his slaves, for what he maintained at the time...to be an insufficient consideration, showed too generally ...a perverse disposition to harass and oppress the apprentices, withholding from him every assistance and indulgence, though customary in the days of slavery, which the strictest interpretation of the statute would bear out; rigidly exacting the whole law from him...dragging him before the special justice on occasions the most trivial ...too often manifesting a discreditable anxiety for the severe infliction of the lash; [and] exclaiming intemperately against [and] affronting [them] by gross and offensive language...¹¹

¹¹PP, 154-I, 1838, Stipendiary Magistrate Report, E.D. Baynes, 1 July 1837, p. 305.

During the Apprenticeship period, there were also serious difficulties over the way the apprentices' work time was scheduled. In Jamaica, apprentices were obligated to work 40 1/2 hours per week for their former masters, but the Abolition Law did not state how this should be organized. The planters in Jamaica almost immediately adopted an eight-hour a day schedule, which meant that apprentices had little time to cultivate their provision grounds, since Saturday was their market day and they were not meant to cultivate their grounds on Sundays. The apprentices wanted to work a nine-hour day from Monday to Thursday and a half day on Fridays to allow them to work their grounds on Fridays, but their masters would not allow this. One historian has suggested that this not only inconvenienced the apprentices but also "prevented them from pursuing alternative occupations to working on the estates. The apprentices were to be kept dependent on the estates for their livelihood so that when full freedom came they would have been accustomed to look to the estates for earnings."¹²

There was an additional problem about the way planters regulated the work time of their apprentices to their own advantage. A stipendiary magistrate in Jamaica, Edmund Lyon, described a system in which, during the shorter days of the year, the planters allowed a couple of hours a day for meal breaks. However, in the longer days during spring and summer, they kept the same time for breaks but had the apprentices start work earlier and finish later. The result could be a work week for the apprentices of an additional ten hours.

¹²Wilmot, "Not 'Full Free', p. 7

The apprentices complained to Lyon, but as he put it, it was difficult to provide proof of this, as very few apprentices had watches.¹³

It was clear that the role of the stipendiary magistrates was to adjudicate disputes between the apprentices and their former owners. But the magistrates were sometimes stymied by the reluctance of apprentices to complain to them. One of the stipendiary magistrates in western Jamaica, J.W. Grant, reported that allowances for the apprentices were withheld if apprentices complained to the magistrates. Grant reported the reaction of an overseer in the face of such a complaint:

A few women came to complain that the nurses were taken away from their children by the overseer, and that he made use of the most brutal and insulting language in addressing them; for this, and because some of the others happened to ask a few questions about their rights, notice has been given that unless all the [live]stock etc, which they were allowed to rear on the property are taken up within a certain time, they will be shot.¹⁴

Some of the stipendiary magistrates themselves were responsible for the harsh punishments of apprentices. The surviving diary of a stipendiary magistrate in Jamaica, Frederick White, allows us to get a glimpse of the severity of some of the punishments meted out by these magistrates and the occasional response of an apprentice. White was particularly upset by apprentices disobeying his orders and, as he put it, “[putting] me at defiance”.¹⁵ Four men he found guilty of this behaviour within a couple of weeks of the beginning of the Apprenticeship system were given 36 lashes each and two women 14 days hard labour in the workhouse. White believed that another apprentice, Thomas Catney, was also insolent and would not go to work, again in the middle of August, 1834. White had

¹³PP, 154-I, 1838, Stipendiary Magistrate Report, Edmund B. Lyon, p. 300.

¹⁴Ibid., Stipendiary Magistrate Report, J.W. Grant, 12 July 1837, p. 286.

¹⁵“Diary of Frederick White, Stipendiary Magistrate, in Jamaica”, 15 August 1834, p. 27.

Catney given 36 lashes and reported in his diary “that this man had the impudence to tell me that I was paid by the White Man & not by the King, for which I gave him the extra 12 lashes.”¹⁶

For White, these were not unusual responses. White reported on the case of some “badly disposed” apprentices on an estate who, he claimed, were the cause of all the apprentices being dissatisfied. White clearly was unhappy about how he was received by the apprentices; since the overseer had already explained the law to them and because of “the reception I met with then called for me to make a very severe example...” So these men also received 36 lashes. In another case, White dealt even more severely with the head man of an estate who, it was claimed, had encouraged other apprentices to strike and do less work than was required. White ordered him to receive 48 lashes.¹⁷

Yet in a rare case in which an apprentice complained about an overseer striking him, White let the manager off with a warning. The manager admitted hitting the apprentice in the head, but White dismissed the case because there was no stick used on this occasion. White was clearly overzealous in his use of the whip and was eventually dismissed, although over a different issue. But the number of floggings of apprentices generally - especially in the early years of the Apprenticeship system - suggest that he was far from unique.¹⁸

There was another area of the Apprenticeship system that former masters also sought to control: the provision in the Abolition Act for compulsory manumission of the apprentices. By virtue of the law, apprentices had the right to purchase the remaining time

¹⁶Ibid., 18 August 1834, p. 37.

¹⁷Ibid., 18 August 1834, pp. 33, 36.

¹⁸Ibid., 18 August 1834, p. 31.

of the apprenticeship period, even against the will or without the consent of the owner. The problem, as with much of this legislation, was with the execution of the law.

Effectively, the method of appraising the value of the apprentice's labour favoured the former owners. Tribunals consisted of a stipendiary magistrate but also two colonial justices, local people who may well have had an interest in apprenticed labour themselves. An anonymous letter to the Colonial Office, apparently from an apprentice, also complained about this situation. Writing from Barbados soon after the beginning of the Apprenticeship system in 1834, the apprentice criticized the oppressiveness of the system, but specifically highlighted the exorbitant cost of appraisal. The apprentice concluded that "there has been many apprentices buying their time but the Price is too much...is paying more than they would bring without emancipation".¹⁹

III The Reaction of the Apprentices

There are some surviving figures to support this view that some apprentices were able to buy themselves out of Apprenticeship but that others found the cost too high. In a return of the valuations from 1st November 1836 to 31st July 1837 for Jamaica, over 1000 apprentices were successful in gaining valuations for their remaining time and were therefore manumitted. These apprentices paid a total of nearly £30,000 to their owners for their manumission. However, during the same period, almost half as many apprentices, about 400 of them, found the valuations too high and were not manumitted.²⁰

¹⁹CO 28/114, Anonymous letter to Spring Rice, 1 October 1834.

²⁰PP, 154-I, 1838, Abstract of the Return of Valuations..., pp. 89-90.

The reports of the stipendiary magistrates generally indicate a strong desire on the part of the apprentices to manumit themselves. Some wished to do so because of the ill-treatment they suffered at the hands of their masters and often committed themselves to work to repay the debt they incurred for their manumission, once they were free. Others similarly sought to choose to work for a different master or mistress or to unite their family in one location. One report suggested that many of the manumitted apprentices were young girls and boys, whom the parents manumitted so that the children could be educated or trained in a trade.

Whatever the motivations, few of the manumitted apprentices continued in field labour. As one apprentice was reported to have said, "Who ever hear of free work a field"? In other words, what free person would ever choose to work in field labour? Many of the skilled apprentices continued at their trades but many women left working as field labourers, preferring domestic work or trading as hucksters.

The data also suggest that the number of apprentices gaining their manumission was increasing rather than decreasing as the end of Apprenticeship was approaching, at least for the non-*praedial* population. In the case of St. Vincent in 1837, two stipendiary magistrates reported a strong desire on the part of the apprentices to purchase their manumission. In the following year in Barbados, there was a rush to manumission, despite the relative closeness to the end of the Apprenticeship system.²¹

Before this rush of voluntary manumission, there was a very revealing report from St. Vincent in early 1838 that the non-*praedial*s were anxious to be manumitted, even at that late date, because they wanted to purchase their own manumission and not be

²¹CO 260/56: Report of Polson, Stipendiary Magistrate, Second District, February, 1838; Report of John Colthurst, Stipendiary Magistrate, 5th District, 31 March 1838; CO 28/122, MacGregor to Glenelg, 20 March 1838, no. 60, Enclosures: Report of Henry Loving, Stipendiary Magistrate - Town District A - for February.

“indebted to the Law”.²² This was even more the case, once the legislation ending the Apprenticeship had been enacted. One stipendiary magistrate in St. Vincent reported that apprentices clearly did not want to become manumitted by the general legislation; they did not want to be, as they called it, “‘a Queen Adelaide’s Man’, that is free by the operation of the Law or as they say ‘that Buckra may change his mind again and make the Apprenticeship longer’”.²³ In St. Vincent and probably elsewhere, apprentices had very clear ideas about freeing themselves; as in the period after emancipation in 1838 when there was a concern about re-enslavement, at this point also, there was a fear that the whites could lengthen the period of Apprenticeship.

Apart from the issue of compulsory manumission, there was another area of contention between masters and their apprentices: the classification system that determined whether an apprentice was a praedial and therefore destined to serve a six-year apprenticeship or a non-praedial and liable to serve only a four-year apprenticeship. The legislation delineating the categories of apprenticeship was fairly complex, but what became clear almost immediately was the former owners’ intent to classify many apprentices as praedials and therefore to have their services for the projected six years of the Apprenticeship period. One stipendiary magistrate in Jamaica, William Ramsay, reported that non-praedial apprentices had been sent to work as field labourers as late as August, 1834 (that is, after the end of formal slavery), so that these apprentices could be serve the longer term. Ramsay went on:

The lists handed in by the employers have not been faithful returns; and I have been obliged to investigate in to the claims of numbers lawfully entitled to their release in 1838, but up to this day [July, 1837], [he had not succeeded]

²²CO 260/56, Report of Polson, Stipendiary Magistrate, February, 1838, Second District.

²³CO 260/57, Report of Polson, Stipendiary Magistrate, May 1838, Second District.

in convincing many of those in charge of properties of the legality of the claims of some of these persons.²⁴

Another stipendiary magistrate working in Jamaica also highlighted this problem and pointed out that many masters had categorized their apprentices, without informing the apprentices themselves. There was very little check on the planters and the result was that many apprentices could “be defrauded of their freedom, and be illegally detained in bondage until 1840.”²⁵

But as with the issue of compulsory manumission, many apprentices were aware of their rights and of the possibility of appealing against their categorization. Moreover, just as with the abolition of slavery in 1834, apprentices also knew that there was a campaign in Britain to bring Apprenticeship to a premature end. As the agitation in Britain increased and as some of the smaller islands of the eastern Caribbean began to enact legislation ending Apprenticeship early, some reports suggested that the system could not last. In St. Vincent, one of the stipendiary magistrates, writing in the summer of 1838 and looking back on the situation, suggested that there would have been passive resistance on the part of the apprentices, if they had to continue as praedials after 1838.²⁶

The abolitionist press in Britain - and particularly *The British Emancipator* - had far more ominous reports about potential trouble in 1838. It republished an article in a Jamaican newspaper threatening serious resistance; one black man reportedly said that “if all not free the same day the king order [meaning August 1838], the whole country will rise, and we will see what buckra and the mulatto can do with us, for we too much for them.”

²⁴PP, 154-l, 1838, Stipendiary Magistrate Report, William Ramsay, 24 July 1837, p 293.

²⁵Ibid., E.D. Baynes, 1 July 1837.

²⁶The Colthurst Journal: Journal of a Special Magistrate in the Islands of Barbados and St. Vincent, July 1835-September 1838, ed. Woodville K. Marshall (Millwood, N.Y.: KTO Press, 1977), p. 128; CO 28/122, MacGregor to Glenelg, 12 May 1838, no. 108, Enclosures: Stipendiary Magistrate Report, Henry Loving, Town District A - for March; CO 260/57, Report of Polson, Stipendiary Magistrate, July 1838, Second District, p. 301.

The Emancipator also suggested that the praedials had never accepted the distinction between themselves and non-praedials; the result on the 1st of August 1838 would be

that the entire class of field labourers will claim to be placed on a footing with their fellows, and that they will enforce those claims by adopting a system of passive resistance - by quietly, but with dogged determination, laying down their hoes and refusing to work any longer as slaves.

Although *The Emancipator* discounted some of the language in these reports, it concluded that these views generally reflected the outlook of most of the apprentices.²⁷

Apprenticeship came to an end for all apprentices in 1838. But Apprenticeship was clearly more than just another form of slavery. Describing a similar system in Cuba almost fifty years later, Rebecca Scott described the Cuban system as “an ambiguous institution” which both masters and apprentices both sought to use to advance their own positions.²⁸

The same was true for the Apprenticeship in the Anglophone Caribbean where, ultimately, many apprentices were able to affect their position in significantly different ways than they had been under formal slavery. In their own words, as told to Major Colthurst, a stipendiary magistrate in Barbados:

‘Massa can’t lick us now, [massa major], till you say do word, nor massa can’t make us work when he like, nor he can’t beat the women, [nor he can’t see us when he like], nor he can’t put us in the dungeon, nor he can’t do nothing at all to us dat bad - for you punish him if he do; he must now give us the yam and the corn, because the law make him, and de house and de cloth, and everything. Massa can’t do nothing to us till he bring us to you.’²⁹

²⁷*The British Emancipator*, 11 April 38.

²⁸Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 186–1899* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 139.

²⁹*The Colthurst Journal*, p. 131