

Letter from the Institute

In the first issue to appear after the year commemorating the 'First Voyage', it seems appropriate to publish a general assessment of how the Columbean exploits have affected both the 'discovered' and the discoverers.

The second item featuring in this issue deals with the various forms of bonded labour. There are two articles on slavery that both confirm that the 'peculiar institution' had lost most of its peculiar characteristics by the time it was abolished. Recent scholarship has stressed that slavery could be a relatively cheap kind of labour, that it could be used efficiently in connection with new technologies and that the tensions between slaves and masters were not very different from those between employers and proletariat elsewhere.

The literature on slavery is very extensive and constitutes a sharp contrast with the dearth of detailed studies on colonial indentured labour of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In some cases the emancipation of the slaves was directly followed by the importation of indentured labourers from Asia. Until now, this connection with slavery has strongly influenced the research on indentured labour, but this comparison seems to be too one-sided. In two articles, forced labour is compared with other forms of unfree labour. Positive changes in the demographic development of Javanese indentured labourers both within and outside of the Dutch East Indies are used as evidence to challenge the traditional view of the abysmally bad labour conditions of indentured labourers in Asia.

In fact, the four articles on bonded labour in this issue all seem to support the conclusion that slavery and indentured labour were not intended as instruments for degrading labourers and to rob them completely of the fruit of their labour. Rather, it seems that the institutions of slavery and of indentured labour have been used in order to make labour available in those areas where the mechanism market of supply and demand could not provide labour at all or only at a wage level which would make the final product unattractively expensive.

These conclusions strongly deviate from the tone and implications of the existing literature on indentured labour. It is our hope that the present issue will contribute to the debate on the nature of forced and bonded labour within the context of the history of European expansion.

The Editors