Emancipation to Indenture: A Question of Imperial Morality

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Between the abolition of slavery, 1834, and World War I, more than a half-million laborers were introduced to the British West Indies under terms of indenture. Indenture implies unfreedom, the exploitation of people forced into exile by misfortune or misadventure. It is an alien concept in modern Western society, and the transoceanic transport of thousands of African and Indian workers during the nineteenth century appears a further testimonial to European racism, to the arrogance of great power, and to the political influence of the West India planters and their merchant associates. In recent years, a growing number of scholars have characterized the whole process of nineteenth-century indenture as a "new system of slavery."[1]

If indentured labor has become, retrospectively, a cause for substantial moral indignation in the twentieth century, it was not lacking weighty moral overtones in the nineteenth. Public schemes for transporting contract workers from Africa and Asia to the free British West Indies were rejected by the Colonial Office before 1840 on grounds that they were contrary to the humane objectives of imperial policy. When this policy was reversed, African and Asian indenture was pursued with reluctance and with reservations about the ethical rectitude of the process. Melbourne's government initiated the indenture of Africans in 1841. Peel's ministry extended the program to India, and Russell's government expanded the length of indenture and the scale of immigration from both places. The advent of this migration has drawn heavy criticism from historians who consider it a singular example of British hypocrisy, inescapable proof that Britain's vaunted humanitarianism—its so-called imperial trusteeship—was easily derailed when confronted by powerful vested interests.

This article contests that view. In an imperfect world, the conduct of high policy commonly necessitates painful compromises on strongly held points of principle. Such compromises can only be justified in moral terms by the need to protect higher objectives. Britain initiated indentured labor migration to the West Indies in full knowledge of the social and political risks of that action. Those risks were deemed acceptable because the

[1]See for example, Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920* (London and New York, 1974); Johnson U.J. Asiegbu, *Slavery and the Politics of Liberation 1787-1861: A Study of Liberated African Emigration and British Anti-Slavery Policy* (New York, 1969); and Monica Schuler, *"Alas, Alas, Kongo": A Social History of Indentured African Immigration into Jamaica, 1841-1865* (Baltimore and London, 1980); Alan H. Adamson, *Sugar Without Slaves: The Political Economy of British Guiana, 1838-1904* (New Haven, 1972); Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905* (Baltimore and London, 1981).

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nation's greater humanitarian policy in the Atlantic basin, specifically her struggle to eliminate slavery and the African slave trade, would have suffered a serious, perhaps irreversible, setback if the emancipation experiment in the free sugar colonies was allowed to fail. In light of the more lofty objectives of imperial policy, indentured labor migration to the Caribbean colonies constituted a vital, if disagreeable, bulwark in a basically humane Atlantic strategy, not the calloused or willful adoption of a "new system of slavery."

Eric Williams contended that the "Emancipation Act marked the end of the abolitionist efforts," adding that it "never dawned upon them [the abolitionists] that the Negro's freedom could be only nominal if the sugar plantation was allowed to endure."[2] Williams was mistaken on two counts: first, emancipation was not the end of the anti-slavery crusade;[3] second, abolitionists, the Colonial Office, and the British parliament chose, quite deliberately, to perpetuate plantation agriculture in the free Caribbean. This solicitousness for plantations should not be dismissed as a self-serving predictable imperial plot to protect long-standing economic interests. No vested interest in the nineteenth century suffered more consistent punishment at the hands of imperial authority than the West India interest. The abolition of the slave trade (1807), emanicipation of slavery (1834), early termination of apprenticeship (1838), and the elimination of tariff protection (1846) represent only the most devastating blows in a long and continuous catalogue of assaults upon the foundations of West Indian prosperity.[4]

Why then did the British government make every effort commensurate with the principles of a free society to preserve plantation agriculture? Its reasons were mainly social, not economic. Without plantations and the ancillary institutions that sustained them, Europeans, it was thought, would not remain in the Caribbean. Without Europeans, the colonies could not hope to attract significant capital investment: public revenue would fall away, causing serious erosion in the physical infrastructure and civil amenities of the islands. Though the imperial government

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[2]Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1944), p 191.

[3]Howard Temperley, *British Antislavery 1833-1870* (Columbia, S.C., 1972). This work provides a full treatment of anti-slavery endeavors after British emancipation.

[4]The position established by L.J. Ragatz [*The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833* (New York, 1982)] and pursued in Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* that the British slave system was a declining economic entity after American independence has been decisively rebutted in Seymour Drescher's *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh, 1972). Drescher argues that abolition of the British slave trade occurred when that commerce was at its prime; moreover, he urges, the slave colonies in the early nineteenth century, far from being old and wasted, generally constituted a young empire with rich economic prospects. R.K. Aufhauser has further shown that slavery in one of the oldest and least fertile of the British West Indies was a rewarding form of investment in the 1820s. See, "Profitability of Slavery in the British Caribbean," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, V (1974), 45-67.

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willingly embraced emancipation, it did not seek the creation of impoverished, culturally regressive peasant societies. The sobering example of Haiti, poor and benighted, loomed large in official thinking.

Abolitionist groups expressed a similar view. Before the Emancipation Act, British abolitionists considered two models for the free Caribbean. One would have imposed an English rural structure on the sugar colonies—a system by which landlords owned the land, yeomen rented it in varying portions, and laborers (essentially, ex-slaves) worked it for wages. This approach, altogether impractical under prevailing Caribbean conditions, was dismissed in favor of perpetuating the plantation system.[5] Leaders of the anti-slavery movement readily conceded that police, vagrancy, and masters and servants laws would be necessary to ensure regular performance of wage labor by freedmen. The campaign to abolish slavery coincided with the movement for poor law reform in England: supporters of both measures drew upon a common reservoir of social principles. As the Poor Law Amendment Act was designed to enhance self-reliance, sobriety, and work discipline among the domestic laboring population, the Emancipation Act, with its supporting social legislation, was intended to encourage disciplined labor on Caribbean estates.[6]

The Colonial Office tried to strike a reasonable balance between the economic requirements of the plantations and the civil liberties of freedmen. It was predictable that planter-dominated West India legislatures would attempt to distort that balance in favor of the planting interest; consequently, imperial authorities, after 1834, exercised vigilance to protect the liberties of freedmen. Several decades of confrontation between the imperial government and Caribbean assemblies had rendered authorities at Downing Street deeply distrustful of the planters, and they insisted that masters and servants as well as vagrancy laws, measures by which planter assemblies intended to bind ex-slaves to the estates, be more lenient than the rigorous codes applying in the mother country.[7] At

[5]David Eltis, "Abolitionist Perceptions of Society After Slavery," in James Walvin, (ed.), *Slavery and British Society 1776-1846* (Baton Rouge, 1982), p. 201.

[6]The best brief exposition of these views appears in David Roberts, *Paternalism in Early Victorian England* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1979), pp. 2-9. All four draft plans for the Emancipation Bill generated within the Colonial Office in 1833 were intended to create circumstances in the West Indies which would be conducive to the growth of regular habits of industry among emancipated slaves. The apprenticeship period following emancipation was viewed as a time for establishing regular industrial routines. This point is more fully developed in William A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830-1865* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 114-127.

[7]In this regard the Colonial Office and the abolitionists expressed the same attitude toward post-emancipation colonial legislation. The Permanent Undersecretary justified leniency in these terms: "The large powers which in England are confided to the Magistracy for the punishment of Vagrants are kept in check by many circumstances which have no existence in the West Indies, and the identical Law, which in the Mother Country may be nothing more than a necessary security against crime, may in the colony become the ready instrument of oppression." Stephen to Gleneig, 22 Aug. 1838, C.O. 323/53, Law Officer's Reports.

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the same time, the Colonial Office was compelled to acknowledge that excessive solicitousness for the rights of freedmen might threaten the ability of the plantations to survive. Sugar was a labor intensive industry, and no amount of technical innovation in the mid-nineteenth century could overcome the planters' need for abundant, reliable labor at critical periods in the productive cycle. In the larger colonies—Jamaica, Trinidad, and British Guiana—vast stretches of vacant land existed; population density was low; and it was entirely possible that ex-slaves, lacking any constraints upon their mobility, would abandon the estates and undertake peasant cultivation on colonial backlands. Women and children were expected to withdraw from regular estate employment in large numbers. If a substantial body of emancipated males abandoned plantation service, the plight of the estates could swiftly become desperate. This situation was particularly grave in the young, highly fertile colonies of Trinidad and British Guiana where labor shortages had plagued the sugar economy in the final years of slavery.

Private abolitionist organizations expressed considerably less concern for the problems of the estates than government authorities. An important political pressure group, abolitionists had long since adopted a syllabus of moral truths. Their doctrines had been reduced to slogans and were applied with little discrimination to all situations as a matter of immutable natural law. One such doctrine declared that free labor was cheaper and more efficient than slave labor. In contrast to the foregoing assertion of Eric Williams, British abolitionists considered the Emancipation Act the first step in a long, arduous campaign to abolish slavery everywhere in the Western world. They appreciated, however, that America's calloused masters could not be moved by moral arguments alone: before such men would jettison slavery, they would have to be convinced that freedom coincided with their material interests. Because the British West Indies provided the first important testing ground for anti-slavery maxims, abolitionists wanted the plantations to provide thriving examples of the superior merits of free labor. For this reason, they were intent to reform West India planters, not destroy them.[*] It was universally understood that the economic success of British emancipation would be judged in terms of the ability of the free Caribbean colonies to export tropical staples: consequently, abolitionists appreciated that their credibility—and with it the prospect of an early end to chattel slavery elsewhere in the Americas—depended upon the preservation of plantation agriculture in the free Caribbean.

[*]Since the abolitionists' outlook was shaped by lingering hostility toward the planters and a sublime affirmation that free labor was superior to slave labor, they were inclined to blame any economic failures that might arise in the free period on the incorrigible behavior of planters.

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From the beginning of apprenticeship,[9] planters in the sugar colonies announced that the immigration of cane workers would be necessary to meet the manpower requirements of the plantations when full freedom arrived. The Colonial Office was cautiously sympathetic to this argument. It agreed to permit immigration, but in 1838 it limited contracts of indenture to one year and specified that all such engagements be formalized in the colony where the indenture was to be served. Places from which immigrants could be procured were strictly controlled. The favored field for recruitment among imperial authorities was the free Negro population of the United States. These people, presumed to number above 35,000, were being forced to leave the slave states, but they were not well received in the northern free states. Each of the large West India colonies launched well formulated plans to attract this population.[10] About a thousand Americans ventured to Trinidad, a lesser number to British Guiana and Jamaica. Plantation life was not suited to them; negative reports filtered back to the States, and recruitment was abandoned there in 1840.[11] British Guiana initiated Portuguese immigration from Madeira. Jamaica conscientiously recruited several thousand North Europeans, but they proved intemperate, unruly, and sickly.[12] Though all the large colonies tried to obtain Africans liberated from the slave trade at the Mixed Commission courts in Havana and Rio, their efforts produced a mere trickle of exhausted recaptives.[13] At every turning, immigration strategies undertaken before 1840 failed.

In these circumstances, the West Indians intensified earlier appeals to recruit labor in West Africa and India. As early as 1835, Sir George Hill, Governor of Trinidad, recommended the immigration of liberated Africans from Sierra Leone to the West Indies on the grounds that it would prove an immense boon to Trinidad and a material benefit to the Africans.[14] Henry Taylor, chief clerk in the West India Department, swept the proposal aside: "Foreign Nations wd suspect the motives of the transference and call it a Slave Trade."[15] Two years later, John Gladstone,

[9]The apprenticeship was conceived as an interim condition between emancipation and full freedom. Scheduled to last six years (it was abolished two years early), it extended many civil liberties to the ex-slaves while requiring that they perform forty-five hours of unpaid labor for their former masters per week.

[10]Alexander Barclay, *Remarks on Emigration to Jamaica: Addressed to the Coloured Class of the United States* (New York, 1840); Edward Carbery, *Inducements to the Coloured People of the United States to Emigrate to British Guiana* (Boston, 1840). For a discussion of this, see Mary Elizabeth Thomas, *Jamaica and Voluntary Laborers from Africa 1840-1865* (Gainesville, 1974), pp. 18-23.

[11]Burnley to Russell, 19 June 1840, C.O. 295/132; H.S. Fox to Aberdeen, 29 July and 27 Aug. 1843, C.O. 318/158.

[12]W.L. Burn, *Emancipation and Apprenticeship in the British West Indies* (London, 1937), p. 291.

[13]Madden Correspondence, C.O. 318/125; MacLeod to Russell, 30 April 1840 and draft response, 23 June 1840, C.O. 295/129, no. 7; Treasury Correspondence, C.O. 318/147.

[14]Hill to Aberdeen, 3 Mar. 1835, C.O. 295/106, no. 8.

[15]Memorandum, Taylor to Stephen, 19 April 1835, *Ibid.*

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father of the future prime minister, and three other absentee proprietors initiated a private program of East Indian labor migration to British Guiana. Their plan conformed to the Indian immigration program already established at Mauritius and was not opposed by the Colonial Office.[16] In 1838, 408 Indian workers were landed in British Guiana.[17] These events provoked a storm of protest among anti-slavery groups. Faithful to their doctrines and biases, abolitionists opposed immigration projects on principle. For them, difficulties arising on the estates were attributable to the recalcitrant, insensitive, and malignant behavior of planters. Immigration, they believed, was little more than a facile substitute for treating freedmen properly—a substitute which had the effect of lowering wage rates for agricultural labor. In the House of Lords, Brougham declared Gladstone's recruitment project a resumption of the slave trade, and the indefatigable abolitionist John Scoble toured British Guiana in 1839 reporting damningly, apparently excessively so, on the treatment of Indians.[18] Guiana's first encounter with "coolie" immigration was short-lived, though not for reasons involving the Caribbean. Indian emigration to Mauritius, begun in 1834, had given rise to serious abuses, and the Government of India suspended all labor emigration in 1838 pending an investigation.

The conflict between planters and abolitionists over immigration peaked in the two years following apprenticeship. A letter to the *Guiana Chronicle* typified West Indian thinking. The author accused the Saints of preparing freedmen for "a state of misery, to which slavery, in its worst form, was never comparable."[19] Without immigration, colonial planters would go to the wall: cultivation would cease, a monopoly of sugar production would pass to foreign slave-labor producers, and the productive districts of British Guiana would be reclaimed by the sea. The most influential planter in Trinidad took uncharacteristically high ground, arguing in the interest of human liberty and the "equal natural rights" of man that the people of Africa and Asia should be permitted to "promote their own happiness" by emigrating to the British West Indies.[20] Nearly eight hundred Guiana colonists petitioned for a relaxation of imperial restrictions on immigration.[21] Memorials in favor of wider labor recruitment arrived at the Colonial Office from the West India Society of

[16]This plan called for five year indentures and a return passage to India at the proprietor's expense. These arrangements were made prior to the 1838 order in council which limited contracts to a single year. I.M. Cumpston, *Indians Overseas in British Territories, 1834-1854* (London, 1953), pp. 13-18.

[17]Enclosure, Light to Russell, 28 Nov. 1839. P.P. 1840 XXXIV (77), no. 12.

[18]John Scoble, *Hill Coolies. A Brief Exposition of the Deplorable Condition of the Hill Coolies in British Guiana and Mauritius* (London, 1840); for a more moderate view, see Enclosure, Light to Russell, 6 Dec. 1839, P.P. 1840 XXXIV (77), no. 13; P.P. 1839 XXXIX (463), nos. 8, 9, 10, 11.

[19]*The Guiana Chronicle*, vol. 23, 14 May 1838.

[20]Burnley to Russell, 13 Dec. 1839. Burnley Correspondence, C.O. 295/127.

[21]P.P. 1840 XXXIV (151), no. 23.

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Glasgow, the Colonial Society, and various English chambers of commerce whose members had a stake in West Indian trade.[22]

The Colonial Office was not categorically opposed to a regulated system of Indian labor migration, though it expressed no enthusiasm for the project.[23] In the case of African labor recruitment, it remained firmly negative throughout the 1830s. The commanding figure at the Colonial Office in this period was its permanent undersecretary and legal counsel, James Stephen, son of a famous abolitionist and brother of another. Wise and humane, Stephen quietly dominated Lord Glenelg, a thoroughly humanitarian though sluggish Secretary of State, 1835-39. Stephen gave elaborate account of his own position. The immigration of Africans "immersed in . . . ignorance, superstition, and moral debasement, . . . would check the growth of Christian civilization among ex-slaves."[24] This judgment was in perfect harmony with abolitionist and missionary opinion. Emigration from non-British territories in West Africa was unthinkable, Stephen thought: it could not be supervised, and it would surely intensify the slave trade. The most critical aspect of Stephen's position—indeed, the enduring basis of Colonial Office objection to West African emigration—was the point noted by Taylor in 1835: Britain should not sacrifice its moral ascendancy in the tropical Atlantic. Having recently remonstrated against Dutch recruitment of Java soldiers at Elmina, Britain would provoke international scandal by establishing regular intercourse in black labor between the west coast of Africa and the sugar colonies. Dutch, French, Spanish, and Portuguese merchants would soon be engaged in similar activity, without appropriate safeguards and without having eliminated the institution of slavery in the receiving American states. Could we say to them, Stephen asked, "Your practice is but an evasive Slave Trade, ours, a bona fide Emigration of Freemen?"[25] Inevitably, he thought, African emigration to the British West Indies would produce a *de facto* legalization of the foreign slave trade under the euphemism, emigration.

Despite Stephen's advice the Colonial Office reversed its position at the beginning of 1841, permitting West Indians to recruit indentured labor at

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[22]Memorials, C.O. 318/143; C.O. 318/147.

[23]James Stephen made a clear distinction between Indian and African labor migration in a long memorandum, declaring that objections voiced against Indian immigration were not "equally plausible" to those raised in opposition to African migration. Memorandum, Stephen to Vernon Smith, 3 Nov. 1840, C.O. 318/148.

[24]This was not a frivolous point. In 1838, Barbados, a colony with no need of immigrant labor, refused to accept Africans liberated from slave ships on grounds that "lawless savages just released from a slave ship might endanger the tranquility of the country" and that "their intercourse with the population of Barbados, emerging as it was from Slavery into freedom, would be most injurious, as leading to the introduction of Obeah, and other Evil and immoral influences, which are now happily almost eradicated." MacGregor to Glenelg, 4 July 1838, C.O. 28/123, no. 158. In 1840, St. Vincent also declared itself unwilling to accept Africans captured by British cruisers. MacGregor to Russell, 22 Feb. 1840, C.O. 28/133, no. 21.

[25]Memorandum, Stephen to Vernon Smith, 3 Nov. 1840, C. O. 318/148.

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Sierra Leone. This change of policy was crucial to the whole history of West Indian indenture in the nineteenth century. The reasons for it are manifold and require explanation at several levels. First of all, there was a change of leadership at the Colonial Office. With the appointment of Lord John Russell as Colonial Secretary in 1839, the office acquired a succession of high-powered administrators—Russell (1839-41), Stanley (1841-45), Gladstone (1845-46), and Earl Grey (1846-52)—three of whom would become prime ministers of England while the fourth was unsurpassed in energy, diligence,and forcefulness. After the resignation of Glenelg, the extraordinary influence of James Stephen, clearly the sternest opponent of African emigration, was pared to a level more in keeping with common bureaucratic practice. During the next decade, strong secretaries of state showed a willingness to exercise substantial independence from their advisory staffs on major policy issues.

In March, 1840, the Governor of Sierra Leone notified the Colonial Office that descendants of some of the original settlers[26] as well as Maroons[27] who had been exiled to Freetown early in the century were desirous of migrating to the West Indies where, it was rumored, wages were comparatively high. Russell conferred with governors of the largest West India colonies, all of whom declared their colonies prepared to admit Sierra Leoneans of any description. By mid-summer, 1840, the Colonial Office stated that it would not disallow the voluntary movement of the Sierra Leoneans in question to the British West Indies—its language being carefully chosen to avoid declaring a new policy position.[28] But in the last days of 1840, Russell informed the Governors of British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica that henceforth Sierra Leone could be included as

[26]These were the descendants of English blacks and Negro loyalists from North America who were established in Sierra Leone under the auspices of the Province of Freedom and the Sierra Leone Company at the end of the eighteenth century.

[27]Maroons were escaped slaves who lived in the high country of Jamaica. After an encounter with British colonists in the late eighteenth century, many were transported, first to Nova Scotia, thence to Sierra Leone.

[28]Vernon Smith to Messrs. Stewart and Westmoreland, 28 July 1840, enclosure 2, no. 6, Russell to Doherty, 21 Aug. 1840, P.P. 1842 XIII (479), appendix I.

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a regular depot from which immigrants might be recruited.[29] Regulations concerning the recruitment, transport, and reception of Africans in the Caribbean were carefully drafted to guarantee protection to emigrants. The governor at Freetown was informed that Britain was not bound to maintain all liberated people at Sierra Leone, and that recaptives landed there in the future would have to secure the means to maintain themselves within three months or migrate to the West Indies; failing either, they would be forced to leave the colony. Russell justified his new position in the following terms:

> I consider the establishment of a regular intercourse between Africa and the West Indies will tend greatly not only to the prosperity of the British West India possessions, but likewise to the civilization of Africa.
>
> A new epoch has arrived for the African race. We have in the West Indies 800,000 negroes, of whom perhaps three-fourths are Christians, in the enjoyment of practical freedom, of means of education and of physical comfort to a very high degree. There is no reason to suppose that their advances in wealth, knowledge, and religious improvement may not be in proportion to the most hopeful anticipations. Nothing like this state of society exists among the African race elsewhere. In Hayti there is a very low standard of government and civilization; in Cuba, in Brazil, and in the United States, slavery; in Africa, slavery, human sacrifices, and the most degrading superstitions.
>
> We have made in the last 10 years a wonderful and successful experiment. But its consequences are yet to be developed, and may far exceed the present good which has been effected, great and surprising as that has been. [30]

In reference to this language, one historian contends that British policy makers were more concerned with "rescuing West Indian planters and investors from ruin than with rescuing Africans from enslavement . . ."[31] Russell would have denied the charge, insisting that his policy on African emigration was intended to do both—that by relieving pressure on the British sugar planter Britain would be fighting, not abetting, African slavery and the slave trade.

During 1839-40, the Whig government had come under increasing pressure to moderate its policy toward the planters. In May, 1839, Melbourne suffered a major setback in parliament when his government attempted to suspend the constitution of Jamaica at the height of a

[29]Russell to Light, 30 Dec. 1840, no. 8. *Ibid.*

[30]Russell to Jeremie, 20 March 1841, no. 10. *Ibid.* It should be observed that Russell greatly exaggerated the number of Christians among the slave population. Only a fraction of the West Indian slave population had adopted Christianity in a meaningful way.

[31]Schuler, "*Alas, Alas, Kongo*", p. 5.

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quarrel between the colonial assembly and the Colonial Office involving the latter's intrusion into the traditional legislative prerogatives of the colony.[32] Tories pounced on the government, noting that its tendency to suspend a new colonial constitution every year (the Canadian constitution was suspended in 1838) would swiftly unhinge colonial confidence in the mother country. Ten radicals, Benthamite advocates of responsible colonial government, voted with the opposition, and the Jamaica Bill passed Commons by a mere five votes—too few to consider implementation.[33] Melbourne resigned. When the Whigs resumed office after the bedchamber interlude, they had little choice but to conciliate the Jamaica assembly. Since Jamaica was the most prominent and populous West Indian dependency, government policy toward that colony formed a pattern for imperial relations with all the sugar colonies. Sir Charles Metcalfe, a former provisional Governor General of India, was invited to assume the governorship of the island. Enjoying immense prestige, Metcalfe conciliated the planter oligarchy: in fact, he identified strongly with the planters' position, believing them unduly maligned by missionary elements. In the interest of colonial prosperity, Metcalfe argued, both the relaxation of labor law and the expansion of immigration were necessary.[34]

Economic developments in Britain also had a profound effect upon policy change. Exports of sugar from the British West Indies fell sharply in the first two years of freedom while the price of the commodity rose about thirty percent. Russell determined that per capita consumption of sugar in Britain had declined twenty-five percent since the final days of slavery.[35] A dietary necessity was fast becoming a luxury for working people. Stories abounded of poor people leaving grocers' shops empty handed or of villagers watching their fruit spoil because they could not afford the sugar to preserve it.[36] Because colonial production had declined, all British West Indian sugar was being consumed in the mother country, and the full weight of the colonial monopoly was being borne by metropolitan consumers. The slave-grown product of Cuba and Brazil, though half as expensive to produce, was excluded from British markets by prohibitive differential duties.[37]

The high cost and scarcity of sugar was but one element in a mounting public debate over national economic policy. Chartists and free traders were locked in combat, offering different solutions to the problem of

[32]For a discussion of the constitution crisis in Jamaica, see Anton V. Long, *Jamaica and the New Order, 1827-1847* (Jamaica, 1956), pp. 32-43.

[33]Philosophical Radicals, though commonly sympathetic to Exeter Hall, were also advocates of responsible colonial government. Elie Halevy, *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1950), III, 231-32, 236-41.

[34]Metcalfe to Russell, 2 May 1840, C.O. 137/249, no. 77; Metcalfe to Russell, 11 June 1840, C.O. 137/249, no. 86.

[35]Memorandum, Russell Papers, P.R.O. 30, 22/4A.

[36]John Prest, *Lord John Russell* (Columbia, S.C., 1972), p. 173.

[37]The average pre-duty price per hundredweight of British West Indian sugar in 1841 was 39s 8d; the average for Cuban was 21s 6d, for Brazilian, 20s 9d.

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working class misery.[38] Although the Whig government could not abide a Chartist solution, it was increasingly attracted to moderate measures of tariff reform as a mode of achieving economic relief. Pressure on the government was intense. By the early forties, the Anti-Corn Law League, having gained a national reputation, was carrying its case into every fold in the social fabric. Even dissenting clergymen were being enlisted in the cause; in August 1841, some seven hundred ministers of the dissenting sects gathered in Manchester to denounce protection on religious and humanitarian grounds.[39] The year before a House of Commons select committee had recommended dismantling protection,[40] and free traders in the House had proposed, for the second consecutive year, the lowering of sugar duties as a means of relieving hardships suffered by working people.

The sugar duties were a special case. The importation of foreign sugar meant the consumption of a slave-grown product, and anti-slavery forces were intensely hostile to the idea. At the international anti-slavery convention held in London during June 1840, delegates unanimously declared that the government must, under no circumstances, permit the "introduction of slave grown sugar into the British market."[41] Although this resolution could only have been calculated to protect British producers from the competition of slave labor plantations, the theme most consistently propounded by delegates to the international convention was that, in due time, the free British West Indies would require no further protection, and England would be amply supplied with free-grown sugar. One overzealous speaker informed his colleagues that under "improved economy and management, the extended cultivation of sugar in the rich soils of Demerara and other colonies by free labour, would speedily enable British merchants to undersell the sugar planters of Brazil and Cuba, so as to drive all slave-grown sugar out of the markets of the world."[42]

Besieged by diverse and contradictory arguments, the government attempted to steer a moderate course between the domestic needs of British workers, the demands of the plantations, and the nation's legitimate concern for freedmen and liberated Africans. Its position on the sugar duties was influenced by developments in West Africa as well as the West Indies. Russell was profoundly impressed by West Indian reports—official and private—that freedmen were earning high wages and enjoying abundant luxuries without performing regular or reliable wage labor—a condition that did not apply among the working masses of Great Britain. William Knibb, Baptist missionary and renowned enemy of the

[38] G. Kitson Clark, "Hunger and Politics in 1842," *The Journal of Modern History*, XXV (1953), 355-74.

[39] Norman McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League 1838-1846* (London, 1958), pp. 104-05.

[40] Donald Grove Barnes, *A History of the English Corn Laws from 1660-1846* (New York: reprint, 1961), p. 244.

[41] Temperley, *British Antislavery*, p. 144.

[42] British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention* (London, 1841), pp. 396-98.

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Jamaican planters, readily acknowledged that freedmen were better off materially than English workers.[43] A Quaker philanthropist was astonished by the amount of money possessed by Jamaican laborers.[44] Governor Sir Charles Metcalfe called them the most comfortable and independent laborers in the world,[45] and magistrates as well as missionaries commented repeatedly on their ownership of horses and display of finery.[46] A stipendiary magistrate wrote that in Guiana the time occupied in work was short, the pay high; whereas in England, "the labourer's task is long and weary, and its remuneration small."[47] The comparative well being of freedmen applied to public appropriation as well. Between 1835 and 1841, the imperial parliament voted equal sums for West Indian and British education, though the population of the United Kingdom exceeded that of the colonies by twenty times.[48] It appeared to Russell and his colleagues that the emancipated population in the West India colonies was enjoying advantages superior to those of English laborers and vastly greater than anything known to the peasantry of Ireland. The world seemed out of joint, they thought: the needy people of the United Kingdom should not be subsidizing either planters or freedmen through high prices and taxation. In March, the West Indian educational subsidy was reduced, and in May the Whigs presented their plan for dropping duties on foreign sugar from sixty-three shillings to thirty-six shillings per hundredweight, setting the new rate only twelve shillings above that paid on colonial sugar.

Melbourne's government was defeated on the sugar duties by protectionist Tories who effectively exploited anti-slavery sentiment. He resigned in June, 1841. The Whig's West India policy, though not successful, had at least been consistent. If the government was convinced that British workers entering the "hungry forties" would have to have more sugar at lower prices, they also acknowledged that any reduction of the sugar duties without a compensating plan to revitalize the West Indian plantations would place the colonies in disastrous competition with Brazil and Cuba. The Colonial Office appreciated all too well what many abolitionists were reluctant to admit, that under existing conditions in the

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[43]Evidence 6158, 6275, Select Committee on the West India Colonies, P.P. 1842 XII (479).

[44]Joseph John Gurney, *A Winter in the West Indies, Described in Familiar Letters to Henry Clay of Kentucky* (London, 1840), pp. 103-04.

[45]Metcalfe to Russell, 30 March 1840, C.O. 137/248, no. 50.

[46]In November 1841, Hall Pringle, a stipendiary magistrate in Jamaica, wrote, "the negroes, both males and females, are, with few exceptions, each of them in possession of a horse, and most expensive clothing, and many other superfluities. . . ." Enclosure, C.O. 137/248, no. 50. Years later, a missionary looking back on the first years of freedom noted how many freedmen were "wasting their earnings on pride and show-horses and guns, for which they had no use. . . ." Hope Masterton Waddell, *Twenty-nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa* (London, 1863), p. 145.

[47]Report from District A, Lower Demerara, P.P. 1842 XII (551), appendix 23.

[48]The annual appropriation provided £30,000 a year for education in the West Indies.

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British West Indies the free labor economy could not withstand competition from slave labor plantations. In fact, the emancipation experiment was in deep trouble. Herman Merivale, a distinguished academic and the future permanent undersecretary at the Colonial Office, described the situation poignantly in his famous Oxford lectures, 1839-41. A free trader, he believed that Britons would not long endure serious scarcities and high sugar prices. To redress the situation he called for "copious immigration" to the larger sugar colonies. If immigration did not bring down the price of labor before tariff reform introduced cheap slave-grown sugar to the British market, the whole social structure of the Caribbean colonies would collapse. No subject had greater claim to public attention, he thought: to allow the major British Caribbean colonies to sink into a Haitian-like obscurity would be a shock to the interests of humanity "which it may take centuries to repair."[49]

Since the Indian government had imposed a moratorium on labor migration and since all other forms of immigration to the West Indies had failed, the Colonial Office, troubled by the spectre described by Merivale, hesitantly turned to Sierra Leone. Stephen repeated his concern that other nations having an interest in coerced labor would cry "hypocrisy" and hasten to embrace "emigration" as a legal form of slave trading, but Russell was determined to "rely mainly on our honesty, and their dishonesty to get us thru' this difficulty . . . ."[50] Clearly, the problem for Great Britain was the example she was setting, not the intrinsic merit of emigration from Sierra Leone to the West Indies. In view of the certainty of freedom in the West Indies and the comparative material prosperity there, British officials, Stephen excepted, expressed no concern about the moral risks of emigration. On the contrary, they believed the West Indies a considerably more desirable environment than Sierra Leone for displaced Africans.

Sierra Leone had been a focus of controversy for much of its history, and the strong sentiments it aroused in the nineteenth century have their academic counterparts in modern historical writing. Sustained in its troubled beginnings by the solicitous energies of the Clapham Sect, Sierra Leone was expected to represent abolitionist philanthropy in action—a nucleus of freedom from which the Saints hoped to disperse Christian civilization and expand legitimate commerce.[51] After the abolition of the British slave trade, the colony became the refuge for slaves liberated by British cruisers; but its economy was perpetually depressed, its proselytizing impact negligible, and its cost in lives and money considerable. Abolitionists vehemently defended the colony; their opponents, many of them West Indian, mercilessly attacked it as a striking example of

[49]Herman Merivale, *Lectures on Colonisation and Colonies* (London, 1928), p. 332.

[50]Memorandum, Lord John Russell, 7 Nov. 1840, C.O. 138/148.

[51]John Peterson, *Province of Freedom. A History of Sierra Leone 1787-1870* (Evanston, 1969), pp. 21-23.

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humanitarian quackery.[52] It was widely considered "White Man's Grave: between 1810 and 1830, all full governors of the colony save one perished in Africa or enroute home.[53] Fifty-three of the first seventy-nine missionaries and wives sent to Sierra Leone by the Church Missionary Society died at their posts.[54] Jests were commonplace: *John Bull* declared that governors to Sierra Leone were sent out like dispatches, in triplicate; and Governor Thompson once commented to parliament, with some relief, that a living governor of Sierra Leone was a rare species.[55] Insurance companies refused to insure governors' lives, as well they might: the annual death rate of English soldiers in the colony was 483 per 1,000.[56] A commission of inquiry, reporting extensive waste and corruption in 1825-26, proposed the removal of the Mixed Commission Court from Freetown to Fernando Po.[57] A select committee endorsed this recommendation in 1830,[58] arguing that anti-slave trade cruisers making most of their captures in the Bights had to beat one thousand miles and six weeks to the windward to land recaptives at Freetown. The Saints prevailed, and the court remained intact, but the health of the colony improved little during the thirties. In 1837, a yellow fever epidemic carried away one-third of the Europeans. A hurricane devastated Freetown in 1838; fever returned in 1839; and locusts descended in 1841.[59]

Russell's conviction that the Caribbean offered better prospects than Sierra Leone for liberated Africans was endorsed by R.R. Madden, a Commissioner of Inquiry to the west coast of Africa in 1841. Madden was an abolitionist, an ex-stipendiary magistrate in Jamaica, and former Commissioner for Liberated Africans in Havana. He had suffered many trials with West India planters;[60] nevertheless, he determined that the best interest of the liberated Africans would be served by their transfer to the British Caribbean. At Sierra Leone, wages were low, under-employment rife, and children were being apprenticed into highly servile situations. The land was infertile; no instruction in agriculture was being

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[52]See, for example, James McQueen, *The Colonial Controversy* (Glasgow, 1821).

[53]Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa* (Madison, 1964), p. 180. In the twenty-seven years after 1824, twenty-eight different administrations governed the colony.

[54]Peterson, *Province of Freedom*, p. 140. Peterson elaborates: "Of five missionaries sent to Freetown in 1823, four died within six months. Even by 1840 the situation had not substantially changed. In January of that year thirteen CMS people arrived in the colony, but by July five had already died and five had returned to England because of poor health."

[55]Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (Oxford, 1962), p. 173.

[56]Merivale, *Lectures*, p. 117.

[57]Fyfe, *History of Sierra Leone*, p. 164.

[58]Report of the Select Committee on Sierra Leone and Fernando Po, P.P. 1830 X (661).

[59]Fyfe, *History of Sierra Leone*, pp. 211, 221.

[60]Madden's experience in Jamaica was described in his *A Twelvemonth's Residence in the West Indies During the Transition from Slavery to Apprenticeship* (Philadelphia, 1835).

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offered; all attempts to produce agricultural staples for export had failed; and most of the colony's meager exports (particularly teak wood, constituting about sixty-five percent of the total) were produced outside its frontiers. Madden contended that recaptives were occasionally kidnapped and sold up-country. Though he acknowledged that no regular or extensive clandestine slave trade existed in the colony, he suspected that much of the population was "aiding and abetting the illegal trade." His support for emigration was clouded only by his belief that local African leaders would impede the exodus of sufficient people to satisfy the needs of the West India planters.[61]

Madden spent only a short time in Sierra Leone, and he gathered much of his insight second-hand.[62] An offended ex-governor, Colonel Richard Doherty, produced a long report for the Colonial Office taking exception to many of Madden's most hostile charges, but Doherty also supported emigration from Freetown to the British West Indies. He went a step farther, declaring that the West Indies had substantial benefits to bestow upon Africans if the latter could be educated in the cultivation of coffee and other tropical staples. If leaders of major ethnic communities at Sierra Leone would consent to a systematic labor migration which could restore to Africa agriculturists skilled in the cultivation of cash crops, then the British might undertake similar migration arrangements with native populations in Yoruba and other areas of West Africa through the intercession of recaptives. This arrangement, Doherty concluded, "would be beneficial both to Africa and the West Indies, and promote, in the former, the views of the association lately formed for the extinction of the slave trade and the civilization of the continent."[63]

The association to which Doherty referred was the African Civilization Society created by Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton to promote an assertive new policy toward West Africa and the Atlantic slave trade. Buxton's activities between 1838 and 1842 had immense spill-over effect for the West Indies and the question of African emigration. In keeping with opinions expressed by even the best informed Britons, Buxton considered African culture primitive, if not barbarous. The antidote widely prescribed for its regeneration was the adoption of Christianity and legitimate commerce. Christianity, Buxton believed, would cleanse barbarous culture of its ritual excesses and its disregard for human life; commerce would reduce idleness, encourage industry, inspire an appreciation for hard work, and promote civilization by the diffusion of European products.[64] The principal impediment to achieving these goals was the presence of the slave trade

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[61]Report of Commissioner of Inquiry on the West Coast of Africa, P.P. 1842 XII (551), appendix no. 15, pp. 246-49, 258-59, 261, 285.

[62]Madden was ill during his visit, unable to travel to settlements at some distance from the seat of government.

[63]Doherty correspondence, Report of Commissioner of Inquiry on the West Coast of Africa, P.P. 1842 XII (551), appendix no. 17, pp. 359-69.

[64]Buxton's views coincided fairly closely with popular British opinion. See, Curtin, *Image of Africa*, pp. 262-64, 267, 416, 421-22.

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which, Britons widely believed, corrupted native societies and discouraged the growth of agriculture, industry, and legitimate trade. After losing his parliamentary seat in 1837, Buxton turned his whole attention to the problems of Africa, developing a comprehensive strategy for the destruction of the slave trade and the civilization of the continent.

Buxton's plan was based on two premises. First, he believed the slave trade to be larger in 1838 that it had been when the African squadron began its work.[65] He concluded, therefore, that the employment of naval patrols unaccompanied by other actions had proven futile. Second, Africa was squandering her wealth by exporting people and neglecting the soil. In his remedy, Buxton advocated increasing the squadron, concentrating it on the coast of Africa, and employing steamships that would not be affected by winds. In addition, he believed British agents would have to penetrate all areas of West Africa obtaining formal treaties with native rulers by which the latter would renounce the slave trade in favor of legitimate commerce. New trading posts would have to be established to facilitate this commerce, and model agricultural stations would be required to teach Africans the means of generating legitimate trade goods. This composite approach would render the slave trade more hazardous; it would "elevate the minds of her [Africa's] people, and call forth the capabilities of her soil."[66]

Buxton's position was printed in two volumes, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (1839) and *The Remedy* (1840). Their substance was communicated to members of the cabinet during the spring of 1838.[67] At the end of the year, the government accepted his main concepts and encouraged him to arouse public interest in the project.[68] By July 1839, Buxton's creation, the African Civilization Society,[69] was flourishing. Presided over by Prince Albert and comprising four archbishops, eighteen bishops, five dukes, eight marquises, fifteen earls, and an executive committee including thirteen peers and twenty M.P.s, the organization represented a remarkable cross-section of English political society,[70] and it bore the imprint of a

[65]Buxton estimated the trade in the vicinity of 150,000 per year.

[66]Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, *The Remedy* (London, 1840), p. 282.

[67]*Ibid*, Preface.

[68]Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, *Memoirs of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, Bart.*, ed. Charles Buxton (London, 1866), p. 455.

[69]Its formal name was the Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and the Civilization of Africa. Auxiliary societies were formed in York, Durham, Newcastle, Derby, Plymouth, Exeter, Bristol, Cheltenham, Oxford, and in two West India colonies, Jamaica and Antigua. *Friend of Africa*, no. 4. 25 Feb. 1841, pp. 59-62.

[70]Temperley, *British Antislavery*, p. 55. Buxton observed the nonpartisan nature of his society, writing that "Whig, Tory, Radical: Dissenter, Low Church, High Church, tip-top High Church, or Oxfordism, all united." *Memoirs*, p. 462. The June 1, 1840 meeting of the society was addressed by a variety of high clergymen, long-standing abolitionists, and by Robert Peel. Daniel O'Connell was in attendance. There can be little doubt that Buxton's society had captivated the attention and imagination of a large segment of the British public.

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nation clearly committed to philanthropic purposes in the tropical Atlantic. Though several members of the government, notably Palmerston and Melbourne, were skeptical of the plan, they could ill afford to endanger their slim majority in the House by overt oppostion.[71] Russell warmly endorsed it; and, after careful preparation, a pilot expedition of three vessels bearing one hundred forty-five Europeans steamed into the Niger River in August 1841 to solicit treaties, inaugurate legitimate trade, and plant a model farm at the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers.

The expedition was a disaster. Malaria swept the crews, killing nearly a third of the men and disabling most of the rest.[72] The model farm did little more than abuse the hospitality of neighboring tribesmen, and the project was abruptly terminated in 1842.

The post-mortems were painful. Russell addressed the African Civilization Society at Exeter Hall in June 1842, urging the members to persevere, to consider the expedition's failure a mild setback in a long and honorable struggle.[73] Commanders of the expedition concluded that anyone contemplating commercial intercourse with interior Africa would have to wait years before profits could be realized. They extolled the merits of establishing in Africa a model black society which would incorporate the qualities of European civilization and serve as an example for African nations.[74] Missionaries were convinced that the evangelization of Africa would require the employment of a "native agency"—a body of black Christians inured to the disease environment who could be trained and supported by Europeans.[75] Samuel Crowther,[76] a participant in the expedition, suggested educating African youths in England for subsequent service as teachers and missionaries.[77] The Church Missionary Society considered Sierra Leone the most suitable training ground, and during 1842 it sought funds to enlarge its Fourah Bay Institution for this purpose.[78] Belief that the civilization of Africa would require a "native agency" was the most universally accepted lesson of the Niger expedition. The means of obtaining that agency remained in dispute.

The question was considered by a Select Committee of the House of Commons which examined British activities on the West Coast of Africa in 1842. Important testimony was offered by MacGregor Laird, the first

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[71]J. Gallagher, "Fowell Buxton and the New African Policy, 1838-1842," *Cambridge Historical Journal*, X (1950), 45-47.

[72]Mortality of the Niger Expedition, P.P. XXXI (83).

[73]*Friend of Africa*, no. 21. July, 1842, pp. 94-107.

[74]William Allen and T.R.H. Thomson, *Narrative of an Expedition to the River Niger in 1841* (London, 1848), II, 434.

[75]Samuel Crowther and Samuel Schon, *Journals of an Expedition up the Niger in 1841* (London, 1842), p. 349.

[76]Crowther, a recaptive, would become an Anglican bishop in 1864.

[77]Crowther and Schon, *Journals*, p. 363.

[78]Church Missionary Society, *Fourah-Bay Institution Building Fund* (1842), Appendix, *Ibid.*, pp. 387-93.

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entrepreneur to attempt a commercial venture in the Niger.[79] Laird enjoyed unusual credibility. In 1840 he had been an outspoken opponent of the Niger expedition, warning the nation against the criminal folly of sending a large body of Europeans to the African interior. Laird had no quarrel with Buxton's goals, only his methods. He knew from personal experience that Europeans could not survive in the Niger, and he strongly contended that the agents of Christian civilization to those regions would have to be native Africans. If, however, African agents were to achieve any significant effect on the continent, they would have to number in the thousands. The only place where thousands of Africans could gain extensive contact with European civilization was the British West Indies: therefore, Laird concluded, the British government should sponsor a massive program of two-way migration between Africa and the West India colonies. Not only would such migration produce the means of civilizing Africa; it would provide the labor needed by West India planters to undersell slave-grown sugar, thereby bringing an end to the slave trade and slavery.[80]

The Select Committee on West Africa focused its attention on three questions pertaining to emigration. Was there, in West Africa, a significant number of prospective emigrants? Would it be desirable for them to emigrate to the West Indies? Could this emigration be conducted without stimulating a new slave trade? On all counts, the committee concluded affirmatively. Sierra Leone, with a population of 40,000 to 50,000, was deemed capable of providing an ample base for emigration, a base which would in all likelihood be enlarged by future recaptives and new entrants to the colony from the African hinterland. Moreover, in view of the meagre resources of Sierra Leone and the improbability that it would ever attract important capital investment, the committee asserted that "it would be well for the African, in every point of view, to find himself a Free Labourer in the free British West India Colonies, enjoying there, as he would, higher advantages of every kind, than have fallen to the lot of the Negro race in any other portion of the globe."[81] To prevent abuses, the committee recommended that emigration be confined to Sierra Leone and that it be promoted and administered by the British government. While achieving cost reductions in the Liberated African Department, the emigration plan, the committee thought, would uplift Africa by returning "to her soil . . . many of her own sons, enriched with civil and religious

[79]For a description of his venture, see Macgregor Laird and R.A.K. Oldfield *Narrative of an Expedition into Interior Africa* (London, 1837). Laird's family firm constructed the steam vessels used in the Niger expedition of 1841.

[80]Laird testified for two days in June 1842. He also provided a detailed statement on emigration which appeared in appendix no. 27 of the Report of the Select Committee on the West Coast of Africa, P.P. 1842 XII (551).

[81]*Ibid*, p. xv.

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knowledge, . . . bringing back with them wealth, and the means of . . . civilization. . . ."[82]

The report of the West Africa committee perfectly complemented the work of another committee, the Select Committee on the West India Colonies, which addressed itself to the ailing Caribbean colonies during the same parliamentary session. Having demonstrated their desperate need for labor, West Indian witnesses insisted that immigration alone could rectify the balance between labor and capital in the large Caribbean colonies. Without it, they argued, the estates would collapse and the freedmen regress into isolation and barbarism. Abolitionist witnesses chided the planters for exaggeration, and William Knibb warned that the introduction of "barbarous" Africans would only increase crime and reduce social morality in the colonies.[83] All evidence, planter and missionary, suggested that freedmen were enjoying vastly improved standards of life—both moral and material. This prosperity was being achieved at serious cost to the estates, and that, the committee believed, was inimical to the future of staple agriculture and the long term social and economic well being of the colonies. The committee recommended, therefore, that immigration be expanded and that it be conducted under supervision of the imperial government.[84]

By the end of 1842, public sentiment had shifted. Transatlantic transport of free African labor, considered anathema only four years earlier, seemed the best means of fulfilling the multiple objectives of Britain in the tropical Atlantic. Economic distress in the West Indies along with buoyant enthusiasm for civilizing Africa had precipitated the change. If emigration could proceed successfully, African migrants would enjoy higher pay and cultural enrichment. When their labors in the Caribbean ceased, they could carry the benefits of civilization as well as the skills of staple cultivation to their countrymen in Africa. The West India colonies would enjoy renewed prosperity: their successful competition with slave labor countries would salvage the great experiment and hasten the demise of slavery and the slave trade. Meanwhile, hard pressed British consumers could relish the prospect of more abundant supplies of free-grown sugar at lower prices. To the delight of the Treasury, the new Atlantic policy seemed to offer an unusual harmony between thrift and philanthropy.[85]

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[82] *Ibid.* To some extent, such efforts were already underway. In 1840 the Colonial Office encouraged Caribbean governors to recommend the names of West Indians of African ancestry who could fill responsible positions in Britain's West African settlements. Draft, Russell to Metcalfe, 20 Nov. 1840, C.O. 137/254.

[83] Evidence 6222-24, 6258, Select Committee on the West India Colonies, P.P. 1842 XIII (479).

[84] Report from the Select Committee on the West India Colonies, P.P. 1842 XIII (479).

[85] Since early 1841 the Treasury had advocated the emigration of Africans to the West Indies as being in the interest of the emigrants, the planters, British consumers, the future of free labor, and the civilization of Africa. Treveylan to Stephen, 21 January 1841, C.O. 318/151.

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This whole strategic edifice was based on the hope that substantial numbers of Africans would accept intercontinental migration. That hope was not fulfilled. Although the Colonial Office, in response to recommendations of the two select committees, assumed full responsibility for the recruitment and transport of African emigrants, the inhabitants of Sierra Leone refused to leave in the numbers needed to realize Britain's policy objectives. Between 1843 and 1846 only about four thousand people emigrated.[86] No amount of government pressure—including the withdrawal of subsidies for recaptives who objected to emigration—could induce the requirement volume of departures.

The reasons for failure were several. No one was starving in Sierra Leone, and few Africans were inclined to perform the rigorous labor required to earn higher wages and allowances in the West Indies. Suspicion of Europeans' motives, terrible recollections of slave voyages, and negative rumors about the sugar colonies discouraged departures. Employers at Sierra Leone opposed emigration as a threat to their cheap labor supplies; missionaries opposed it because it drew away their communicants.[87]

There was one remaining resort for immigrants. In 1842, Indian emigration to Mauritius had been renewed under a new system of regulations, and in that year 34,525 Indians arrived at Port Louis.[88] The Colonial Secretary, Lord Stanley, frustrated by failure at Sierra Leone and goaded by members of the metropolitan West India interest, approached the government of India proposing the extension of Indian labor migration to the major West India colonies. The Indian government gave its approval in mid-1844, whereupon Stanley notified Jamaica, Trinidad, and British Guiana that Britain would administer a program of Indian migration provided those colonies deferred the cost.

Indian immigration was expensive. Contracts of indenture, like those applying to Africans, were limited to one year, and immigrant workers who repaid their passage through twelve months of bonded labor were under no obligation to recontract with their original employers. The economic impact of Indian labor had scarcely been felt when Peel passed the abolition of the Corn Laws through a traumatized House of Commons. Abolition of the sugar duties followed shortly despite the combined opposition of anti-slavery forces and the West India interest.[89]

The spectre raised earlier by Merivale had materialized. Sugar prices abruptly fell by about thirty percent and, except for a momentary recovery in the late fifties, they remained depressed during the mid-century. In the large Caribbean colonies planters sincerely believed that free-labor sugar

[86] Report of Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners, P.P. 1846 XXIV (706), pp. 27-29.

[87] Reports of R.G. Butts and R. Guppy, Commissioners of Inquiry into the Subject of Emigration from Sierra Leone to the West Indies, P.P. 1847-8 XLIV (732).

[88] Tinker, *New System of Slavery*, p. 81.

[89] C. Duncan Rice, "'Humanity Sold for Sugar!' The British Abolitionist Response to Free Trade in Slave-Grown Sugar," *The Historical Journal*, XIII (1970), 402-18.

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plantations could not survive without protection: all three colonies swiftly terminated costly programs of Indian immigration, and British Guiana and Jamaica deeply cut other government expenses in an effort to minimize losses.[90] Hoping to conciliate badly battered West India proprietors, the imperial government extended labor recruiting rights to the Kru coast of West Africa,[91] and in 1848 it assumed the full cost of transporting fresh recaptives to the Caribbean.[92] The number of Africans landed in the West Indies during the late 1840s was comparatively large, but that development constituted a momentary abberation in an essentially unrewarding and unreliable recruitment program.[93] Whatever benefit African immigrants provided the estates was dramatically offset by an international depression that generated revolution in Europe and bankruptcy across the Caribbean.[94]

When the Brazilian slave trade ended in 1851, recruitment of African recaptives abruptly diminished. Thereafter, only India offered the labor resources required by Caribbean proprietors, and only on the strength of loans guaranteed by the British government did the colonists of British Guiana and Trinidad renew experiments with Indian labor. Neither colony had been pleased in its initial encounter with Indian workers.[95] Neither wished to resume immigration without more rigorous regulatory measures, including longer term contracts.[96] Jamaicans had been equally displeased with the first wave of Indian immigrants. Suffering less profoundly from labor shortage and possessing dimmer prospects for plantation prosperity, Jamaica, in contrast to Trinidad and British Guiana, refused to renew Indian immigration. Her plantation economy declined precipitously: by the mid-fifties, Jamaica's sugar exports were about a third what they had been in the final years of slavery, and they continued

[90]The legislatures of Jamaica and British Guiana exercised control over colonial budgets. The Trinidad Legislative Council did not. Extensive cuts in colonial budgets undertaken in the wake of free trade involved British Guiana and Jamaica in extended constitutional crises with the metropolitan government. See, Green, *British Slave Emanicpation*, pp. 240-43.

[91]Papers Relative to Emigration from the West Coast of Africa to the West Indies, P.P. 1847 XXXIX (191), p. 8.

[92]Ninth General Report of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners, P.P. 1849 XXII (1082), p. 20.

[93]Between 1845 and 1849 over 13,000 Africans were landed in the British West Indies from Sierra Leone, the Kru coast, St. Helena, Rio and Havana. G.W. Roberts, "Immigration of Africans into the British Caribbean." *Population Studies*, VII (1954), 260. The reason for the large number is the increase in seizures by British cruisers occasioned by the expansion of the slave trade to Cuba and Brazil following the abolition of the British sugar duties, 1846.

[94]Colonial banks as well as numerous metropolitan West India houses folded. In Trinidad, the governor had difficulty finding solvent colonists to serve in the Legislative Council. Harris to Grey, 12 Aug. 1848, C.O. 295/164, no. 93.

[95]Walker to Grey, 4 Dec. 1848, C.O. 111/260, no. 151; Harris to Grey, 12 June 1847, C.O. 295/157, no. 52; Harris to Grey, 21 Feb. 1848, C.O. 295/160, no. 21; Harris to Grey, 1 July 1848, C.O. 295/163, no. 75.

[96]K.O. Lawrence, "The Evolution of Long-Term Labour Contracts in Trinidad and British Guiana, 1834-1863," *The Jamaican Historical Review*, V (1965), 15-23.

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to fall during the remainder of the century.[97] The revival of Asian immigration saved the sugar economies of Trinidad and British Guiana. Production levels stabilized by the mid-1850s and accelerated sharply thereafter. In the late sixties, the British West Indies, despite the deterioration of Jamaica's plantation economy, were exporting sugar at pre-emancipation levels.[98]

The decade of the 1850s produced substantial changes in the moral climate of the British Empire. Vigorous humanitarianism gave way to the religion of free trade. Buxton's influence was eroded by the Niger fiasco, and after his death in 1845 no figure approaching his stature rose to succeed him. The diminished strength of abolitionism became apparent to all in the battle over the sugar duties. The Saints' assertion that free labor was superior to slave labor retained little credibility; the nation gradually lost interest in the ideals of the emancipation experiment; and the West Indies commenced their career as an imperial backwater capable of arousing public excitement only in times of violent crisis. A momentary phase in the life of the British empire when the nation prided itself as the redeemer of millions of people brutalized by slavery and the slave trade was passing. Britons still had lessons to teach the world, but their new oracle of learning was the Manchester school, not Exeter Hall. Indenture would remain a moral issue, frequently debated within the colonial establishment, but the conduct of East Indian migration to the West Indies gradually became a hardened routine. Even those who found it distasteful— among them, Herman Merivale, Stephen's successor as permanent undersecretary—were perplexed by the inescapable dilemma which governed imperial relations with the Caribbean. For Trinidad and British Guiana, at least, there seemed no alternative to immigration except the destruction of the staple industry with human consequences less acceptable than the mode of indenture which Merivale patently disliked.[99]

From the beginning, indentured labor migration was related to tariffs. When colonial sugar production fell, prices rose and consumer demand as well as consumer irritation grew. Unless the colonies acquired sufficient labor to extend production and reduce prices, they were likely to confront selective tariff cuts that would place them in unequal competition with slave labor producers. But even if indentured labor migration did generate higher production and lower prices, there was no assurance in an era of rising free trade sentiment that general tariff reform would not thrust British planters into competition with Cubans and Brazilians. When, in

[97]Average export of sugar from Jamaica in the four years 1831-34 was roughly 68,000 tons; between 1854 and 1857 it was 21,875 tons. Noel Deerr, *The History of Sugar*, (London, 1950), II, 198-99.

[98]*Ibid.*, p. 377. In general, sugar production declined in the Windward Islands and Jamaica after emancipation. It stabilized, even expanded slightly, in Antigua and St. Kitts. In Barbados, a colony having a very dense laboring population, it more than doubled by the late sixties. And, of course, production was sustained in Trinidad and British Guiana by virtue of indentured labor.

[99]Merivale to Labouchere, 9 Oct. 1857, enclosed in C.O. 28/187.

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1846, England's landed interest fell before the juggernaut of free trade, there was little hope that Caribbean proprietors, despite their appeals to humanitarian conscience, would be spared the same treatment. At the beginning of the decade, indentured labor migration was viewed as a means of relieving public pressures for selective reform of the sugar duties; at the end of the decade, it was perceived as the only means of redressing the damage occasioned by general tariff reform.

In managing the affairs of state, government officials rarely enjoy the luxury of choosing between policies that are plainly good or plainly evil: their task involves weighing the merits and liabilities of different strategies in hope of selecting courses of action that promise the greatest measure of positive results at the lowest social cost. Indentured labor migration to the West Indies was clearly a mixed bag. It placed immigrants in the trust of authoritarian planters hardened by their earlier management of slaves. Because the most well intentioned and thorough government regulations could not ensure protection of immigrant workers in all situations, indentured labor migration was approached with caution, if not reluctance. The degree of caution was determined by the origin of the migrants. The Colonial Office expressed least concern for North Europeans. It was most solicitous of Africans, and only the impending failure of the free labor experiment induced Britain to resort to African indentures. Historians who conclude that African labor was recruited merely to protect sagging British investments in the Caribbean vastly oversimplify imperial objectives in the Atlantic and undervalue the power of official humanitarianism.

Everyone at the Colonial Office appreciated that sugar estates were not the most desirable basis for erecting a new social order. Plantations were, however, the only stable socio-economic institutions available in the West Indies. Early Victorian Britons placed no confidence in peasant democracy, particularly when the peasants were ex-slaves, only partially acculturated to European civil and religious customs. Christianity and European civilities were universally regarded the hallmarks of higher civilization. Unless the plantation system with its prevailing hierarchy remained intact, the sugar colonies, it was widely believed, would regress to a state of barbarism, displaying to the world the baleful consequences of emancipation. Europeans at the summit of that hierarchy were, admittedly, of questionable character, but their proprietary role lent them a position in the colonies roughly equivalent to that of the landed class in England: their presumed responsibility involved inculcating in the lower orders "proper" civic attitudes, Christian values, and a respect for "ennobling labor." If, in retrospect, this social attitude appears both arrogant and futile, it was, in the 1840s, entirely in keeping with provincial English practice and in essential harmony with the concept of cultural uplift maintained by missionary bodies in the free Caribbean.

Decisions on African indenture were critical to the long process of labor migration. Having overcome its resistance to the transoceanic movement of African labor, the Colonial Office experienced little difficulty taking a

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further step to Indian indenture. It is by no means clear that during the early years of indentured labor migration "human values," as one scholar has argued, "mattered less than the drive for production, for exploitation."[100] During the first forty years of the nineteenth century, imperial Britain exhibited little interest in protecting the productive and exploitative interests of West India planters. There is little reason to believe that having dismantled the economic apparatus of the sugar colonies in the interest of humanity, the metropolitan government would reverse its course, concentrating all effort on production and exploitation at the expense of humanity. The immigration of Africans and East Indians was undertaken because the human values sought by the Colonial Office could not have been achieved without production: indeed, economic failure of the emancipation experiment could only have strengthened the hand of slave interests elsewhere in the Americas. The Colonial Office viewed indentured labor migration as the lesser of several evils. Though the purposes and conduct of indenture may have changed as the moral climate of empire evolved during the last half of the century, at its inception immigration policy did not belie Britain's fundamentally humane posture in the tropical Atlantic.

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[100]Tinker, *New System of Slavery*, p. 60.

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