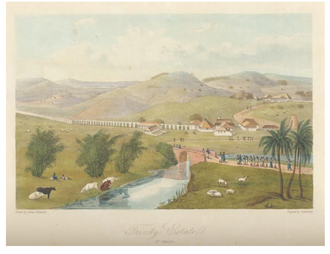
A RESEARCHED PAPER

From the perspective of the Caribbean plantation owner, the 1700s were the golden age. They were kings of their manor. They ruled omnipotently over their slave subjects as, “men who raised themselves from poverty to affluence and who reclined in the lap of luxury, in tropical ease.” There were no rules governing how they treated their slaves, so planters had free reign to instil the respect of their authority through fear of punishment. And that’s exactly what they did. Some claimed that at the time they were opposed to how violently slaves were treated, but couldn’t voice their true thought. Many though, thought that slaves were lesser human beings with more in common with horses than men. If the 1700s were the golden age for plantation owners, then the 1800s would be for many their Dark Age. Traveller Mrs Carmichael described the changing planter’s lifestyle by saying, “The affluence which once existed in some degree, is to be found no more.” They lost their ability to reign as little kings; people began to stand up for the ex-slaves’ rights. The lives of the plantation owners were forever changed by emancipation. These changes could be seen as early as the period of apprenticeship, which lasted in the British colonies from 1834 until 1837 and 1838.



The 1800s saw the gradual evolution of emancipation sweep across the islands of the Caribbean even before it reached the United States. Britain was one of the catalysts in this process by first abolishing the slave trade in 1808. They proceeded to regulate slavery in their own colonies, imposing limits on punishments and requiring planters to register their slaves so that the government could keep track of births and mortality. Planters were upset by the fact that a government across the ocean was creating the rules and regulations by which they had to live. Many plantation owners would see their empires shrink in a single lifetime.

Still, the British government tried to tailor its approach to emancipation based on what it believed its island planters needed. Islands saw varying degrees of speed and success in the process of the initiation emancipation. For many Caribbean islands apprenticeship was the steppingstone between slavery and freedom for oppressed Africans. Antigua was one of the few British islands that skipped the apprenticeship process. Others, like Jamaica and Barbados, went through the transitional period of apprenticeship. This was intended to preserve the planters’ access to a stable labour force, while also ending slavery and instructing the ex-slaves and ex-masters in the system of free wage labour.

The first step that affected the lives of plantation owners was the abolition of the slave trade. Although the illegal slave trade persisted, slave owners were forced to ameliorate the treatment of their slaves because the never-ending supply began to dwindle. Thus plantation owners had to reduce punishments and improve food and other aspects of slaves’ conditions. Later, as talk of emancipation began to gather strength, there was another push for slave owners to treat their slaves better. English planters did not want to be made a public spectacle back in England for their mistreatment of slaves, and thus further emancipation’s cause. At the same time, they resented the loss of total control over the bodies of those whom they claimed as slaves. As the push for the abolition of slavery grew, planters believed that their own rights were shrinking. They could no longer inflict punishment on their slaves for any reason they pleased, to any degree that they desired, and after apprenticeship began in 1834, they could no longer inflict physical punishment at all. Special magistrates were sent from Britain to undertake the responsibility for punishing unruly apprentices and masters.

Before emancipation slave owners feared that less severe punishments would lead workers to greater disobedience. They feared that eventually, it would lead to uprisings. Yet after emancipation, many no longer feared insurrection. British traveller James Thome quoted a planter as saying, “it was feared before abolition, but now no one thought of it.” Planters believed that revolts were no longer an issue because the former slaves were now more free and well treated, therefore happier. Revolts did, however, still occur. Morant Bay, Jamaica, was in 1865 the epicenter of one such revolt. Blacks protested their unfair treatment outside a courthouse in Morant Bay. The protest eventually involved more than 300 people; plantations were burned and some were killed.

Planters had opposed emancipation, in part, because they believed that it would destroy their profit margin. They used economics to defend the need for slavery. They believed that they would be unable to afford to pay ex-slaves for work that they had previously done free. The change would severely hurt planters’ income. After the initiation of freedom, many changed their mind and determined that emancipation may even be better than slavery. Others could not accept that slavery was over. They either refused to employ ex-slaves, except at the most menial wages, and under the most slave-like conditions, or they petitioned the British government for new imports of indentured workers from Africa and Asia.

Apprenticeship was created as a middle ground between slavery and complete emancipation. The idea was to improve working conditions for ex-slaves, grant them wages, and some degree of choice of work. Under apprenticeship, planters were required to pay wages to their slaves. Planters received some compensation but it was poorly distributed and quickly squandered. Wages were not high, and planters frequently baulked at actually paying them. In practice, apprenticeship was often little more than light slavery. Yet again, after the beginning of the apprenticeship, some planters changed their minds and became supporters of the new system. One planter interviewed by James Thomewent as far as to say “we (planters) have now rejoiced that slavery is abolished.” Some believed that “wages are found to be an ample substitute for the lash.”

Magistrates were appointed in order to defend former slaves’ rights. They were designed to regulate planters’ treatment of their apprentice workers. It’s questionable how effective these magistrates really were:

“Some were intelligent and sincere, others were disinterested and not so bright; some were won over by the planters and others leaned too far backwards to protect the apprentices”

Planters still managed to get around magistrates’ rulings. One way was described by Special Magistrate J.B. Colhurst:

“To charm and flatter a man on his arrival, and laud him to the skies, is a common practice, but the moment they find him not purely their own, they lose no opportunity of annoying him in every possible way.”

Some planters and masters continued mistreating slaves regardless of magistrates’ rulings. Magistrates sometimes corrupt or really did not care for the well being of apprentices. James A. Thome wrote that Colhurst, who claimed to be fairer than many, “showed a great and inexcusable partiality for the masters.” Free people still faced biased treatment, and planters still found means of punishing them for disobedience. Flogging which had been common practice by planters was now only to be used for extreme disobedience. Some of the planters in Barbados and Antigua applauded this concept, but only after it was initiated. Thome described how the coming of emancipation made some planters feel relieved: “Emancipation has freed us (planters) from the painful task of flogging!” Still, others continued taking punishment into their own hands because they knew of no other way to control workers. Thome described managers as “many of the former are ignorant, degraded men, who know how to govern only by the whip.” Colhurst said that he did not support the harsh punishments still inflicted by manager on slaves. He said that he would, “permit no man to inflict upon apprentice any act having the semblance of punishment.” He goes on to say that, “those gentlemen cling to habits contracted by slavery, which the jealousy of their lost authority fosters up.”

Apprenticeship was still considered by many to be ineffective or unnecessary. Critics said that planters did not do anything to prepare apprentices for their eventual freedom. Some planters remained upset that there was no longer slavery. Another problem they had with apprenticeship was that they were required to minimize hours that former slaves could work. Former slaves could work no more than forty hours a week, and only from dusk till dawn. One such policy was adopted in Jamaica; “according to the abolition act the Jamaicaapprentices were bound to give 40 ½ hours or free labour to their owners every week.” Planters disapproved of this regulation because prior to apprenticeship slaves worked the fields and processed sugar twenty-four hours a day. They believed that not allowing this would also greatly cut into profit margins. They managed to get around the limitations of the workweek by paying apprentices for any time over the required 40 and ½ hours.

Emancipation was received with mixed results among planters. Many plantation owners still managed to work their way around the limitations of apprenticeship. Some of the benefits of apprenticeship weren’t followed. It was essentially glorified slavery. Other planters became proponents of emancipation and were able to adapt, though they often had to cut back the number of slaves they had and the amount of land they cultivated. Plantation owners would never again be Kings of their land, at least not through constant physical force and the threat of punishment. Unable to exert the same kind of power over others, they would themselves never feel the same