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978-1-108-02083-1 - The Slavery of the British West India Colonies

Delineated, Volume 2

James Stephen

Excerpt

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THE STATE CALLED

SLAVERY,

IN THE

BRITISH WEST INDIES,

DELINEATED AND CONSIDERED.

BOOK II.

DELINEATION OF THE STATE IN ITS ORDINARY
PRACTICAL NATURE AND EFFECTS.

CHAPTER I.

REASONS FOR RESUMING THIS WORK ; DEFENCE OF THE
FIRST, AND PLAN OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

THE two grand divisions of this work proposed at the outset, were, first, a delineation of slavery in a theoretic view, as a legal institution ; and secondly, a delineation of the state in respect of its practical nature and effects. The former part of my task has been performed ; the latter has been long retarded, and still remains to be accomplished.

While many readers of my former volume have expressed some impatience of desire for the appearance of the present ; others, perhaps, have thought that this part of my plan might be conveniently and properly laid aside ; considering how much the practice of slavery has, during the last five years, been discussed before the public by other writers, whose principles are in accordance with my own.—To a large part of the community, it may seem that the great objects of my labours, the mitigation and gradual abolition of slavery, are virtually at-

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tained or secured ; and that the Parliamentary resolutions of May, 1823, with the consequent measures of Government, have made this sequel of my work useless, at least, if not even adverse to my purpose.

That such views have been entertained by many, even among the sincere friends of the anti-slavery cause, I well know and lament ; and have reason to fear that they may still widely prevail ; for, though those measures have been nearly fruitless in all the colonies, and in some of them the solicitations of the Crown, and the voice of Parliament have been treated with the utmost contempt and defiance by the Assemblies ; their agents and partizans in this country have played a far more politic game, labouring indefatigably to persuade the British Public that opposition in language has been accompanied, in some measure at least, with practical compliance ; that the Planters and Assemblies, like the son in the parable, while answering to the parental command “ I go not,” have actually gone into the field : that much has been already done, and that patience on our part, alone is wanting to make their obedience entire.

In my last publication, “ *England enslaved by her own Slave Colonies*,” I endeavored to shew the erroneousness and the fatal tendency of such opinions ; but not, I fear, with sufficient general effect on the public mind ; and if any of the real friends of reformation still indulge a false security, and condemn as needless, further attempts to excite, on the right side, the feeling of the British people, one effort only remains by which I can hope to disabuse them ; the laborious and painful one, which again employs my pen. If any thing can effectually serve to dispel the delusions that prevail, and satisfy reasoning minds that slavery has not been, nor without parliamentary legislation ever will be, reformed, it is such means as I have long since engaged to supply ; a development and demonstration of the true practical nature and fixed principles of the system, not in its particular, but general administration, deduced exclusively from the evidence of those by whom it is defended and maintained.

In proposing remedies for the inveterate, deeply seated, and deadly disease of colonial slavery, I have to encounter difficulties like those of a faithful well-informed physician,

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whose patient has been long in the hands of deluded friends, and self-interested crafty practitioners ; both adverse, though on different views, to the only possible means of cure. The former, from groundless apprehensions of danger in the right and only effectual course, are trusting to wretched palliatives, which are of no real use even in the way of mitigation, while the latter are applying them, and alleging good effects from their inchoate use, merely to support their own credit, and keep the patient longer in their own mercenary hands. The physician is aware, that to dispel the delusion will be not only a difficult, but a thankless and invidious office ; but sees there is no other expedient to prevent a fatal termination. To obtain the use of truly efficacious means, he must convince the too confident friends of the vanity of their present hopes, and the fallacy of the pretended improvements, by exposing to them, however alarmingly, the inveterate constitutional causes, the still subsisting malignity, and extreme danger of the case.

But though the present state of the Anti-slavery cause, unhappily, is not such as to absolve me from my promised task, much has been done by enlightened coadjutors that may well justify a great contraction of my plan. I refer particularly to the work called "NEGRO SLAVERY," to the writings of THE REVEREND MR. BICKILL, and MR. COOPER, and above all, to those very valuable tracts, THE ANTI-SLAVERY MONTHLY REPORTS. They contain, collectively, such copious information as to the practice of Slavery in the Sugar Colonies, that had the writers adopted my own plan of delineating Slavery systematically, and in its ordinary character, and relying only on the evidence of our opponents, they would have left me little, if any thing, to add ; but though those well informed writers have not thought it necessary to use such abstinence in respect of evidence (which certainly they were no wise bound to do), enough has been proved by them from irrefragable authority, and even out of the mouths of the planters themselves, to establish many of the abuses that I meant to develop ; and to refute decisively most of the idle pretences of improvements which I should otherwise have had to repel.

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I shall be content to leave in their hands all that relates to the shocking general neglect of intellectual, moral, and religious instruction; to the profanation of the Sabbath; to the discouragement of marriage; to the licentious and indecent treatment of females; and to excesses and barbarities in punishment; with the non-execution and perversion of those laws which profess to restrain such abuses. I shall abstain also from adding to their strictures, or to my own in my former works, on the hardships under which the slaves labour, in point of law and practice, from their liability to be sold apart from their families, the rejection of their evidence, the impediments to their acquisition of freedom, and its insecurity when obtained.

What then, it may possibly be asked, after such a catalogue of exclusions, are to be the subjects of my delineation and proof? "Surely it may be thought, most of, if not all, the evils of slavery must be comprised in this enumeration."

Would to heaven that the fact were so!—The state, though bad enough, would be merciful and mild, compared with what it really is. It would be a case sufficiently lamentable and opprobrious; but not such as has harrowed up my soul with unavailing sympathy from youth to age; and now urges me to renew my labours, after more than three score and eleven years have chilled my human hopes, benumbed my faculties, and left me no selfish good beneath the sun, so precious as repose and peace.

Numerous and cruel though the oppressions are by which the poor negroes are degraded, tormented, and destroyed, there are two which I have always regarded and publicly denounced as by far the worst; not only because the most general, and the most afflictive, but because they give birth and virulence and tenacity, to almost all the rest. I mean *the truly enormous amount of labour to which the field negroes, or ordinary plantation slaves, are coerced; and the almost incredible degree of parsimony with which they are maintained.* Most of the other sufferings incident to their hapless state are casual and temporary; but these are certain and perennial; and though mitigated in a small degree under the

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more liberal of their owners, are, to a great and grievous extent, their universal lot.

Such oppressions are also the least likely to meet with any private restraint or correction. Abuses, the effects of anger, revenge, or other malignant passions, in a manager, overseer, or other subordinate master, might be expected to be much restrained or punished by the owner's authority, if brought to his knowledge; for in such cases the interests of proprietors and of slaves are clearly on the same side. But oppressions of a gainful or economical kind, are perpetrated for the owner's emolument; and the present sacrifices necessary to their correction are what few sugar planters are able if willing to make. Such oppressions also, when established by general usage, become, from the effects of commercial competition, hardly capable of correction, without ruinous consequences to individuals, except by the regulations of a general and compulsory law.

The pre-eminence of evil in these economical branches of oppression will more fully appear, when it shall be shewn what cruel effects they produce, and how large a portion of the other ordinary severities of the system are their natural, and, in great measure, inseparable attendants. Though the ordinary discipline of the plantations is odious and inhuman in its nature, the inflictions of the *vindictive*, when compared with those of the *coercive* whip, are small in their general amount; and the former, too, are, for the most part, the penalties of defaults to which excess of labour and insufficiency of aliment give rise. Of every hundred stripes, that are given on a sugar plantation, exclusive of the drivers' coercive process, ninety or more are inflicted for absence from the field at the appointed time, or the short performance of a solitary task; and that these delinquencies are much more often the effects of fatigue and inanition than any other cause, I shall abundantly prove, out of the mouths of the planters themselves.

How, indeed, can these consequences be doubted? If, under a system of forced labour, the work imposed is excessive, and the quantum of food inadequate, it is manifest that in proportion to the degree of those economical oppres-

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sions, must be the severity of the discipline by which they are imposed. The resistance of nature can be no otherwise overcome. If you would drive your tired post horses another stage, you must not restrain your driver from the free use of his whip; still less if they have been also stinted in their food.

That labour, so excessive and continuous as to leave the common field negro neither spirits nor time for any voluntary efforts, must preclude his intellectual and religious improvement, his acquisition of property, and whatever else we comprise in the idea of civilization, is equally clear. In short, this species of oppression, when its cruel extent is proved, will be plainly seen to be incompatible with all real improvements in the physical condition of the slaves; and still more with such advances in the intellectual and moral scale, as are held (whether rightly or not, I will not in this place enquire) to be necessary preparatives for the termination of their bondage.

For these reasons, then, while I rely upon the writings of my fellow-labourers, as having exonerated me from a large part of the task that I undertook, I feel the engagement still binding, and the duty imperative, to delineate the general practice of the sugar colonies, in regard to those most important articles of oppression, the extreme degree of forced labour imposed upon plantation slaves, and the great inadequacy of maintenance given in return.

Let me not be understood to mean, that my humane and respected coadjutors have wholly neglected those most interesting topics. Enough has been said by them to shew that their views in these respects are in general like my own; though the excess of labour has not, in my judgment, had that prominence among the abuses they have exposed, which its extreme cruelty and pernicious effects deserve; nor been stated with sufficient circumstantiality and precision. But the grand and general *desideratum* they have left me to supply, is a demonstration of the facts of the case from irresistible evidence; for such I may surely call testimony on the anti-slavery side, when cited from colonial tongues and colonial pens alone. And this, in respect of the ordinary amount of forced labour, is of peculiar importance; because no part of the general system has been a subject of so much assiduous

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misrepresentation by our opponents; nor is there any other, I believe, in respect of which such wide misconception prevails. The quantum of daily work directly and indirectly exacted from the field negroes has been reduced by bold assertions and artful fallacies to less than one half of its actual ordinary amount; and this, by writers and witnesses whose statements have been strongly accredited to the public by their means of information, their characters, and stations in life. A hundred colonial tongues and pens have not only boldly denied the existence of this most general and notorious species of oppression, but actually claimed credit to the Planters for wonderful moderation and liberality in the use of their coercing power; assuring us that the labour of the slaves is very light; nay, lighter by far than that of the free English peasant. This latter proposition, indeed, has long been the chorus of their common song; and incredible though the fiction will be found in its nature, when examined by a reasoning mind, yet such is the effect of bold reiterated public assertion, that many, I doubt not, believe it; or regard it at least as having some approximation to the truth.

How, indeed, can I doubt this, or deem a demonstration of the true case superfluous, when I find the delusion still current even among some eminent political economists and statesmen; so as actually to form an element in their calculations, in plans for the mitigation and gradual extinction of slavery, and for the supplanting it by free labour in the cultivation of sugar estates? If they had not been grossly deceived as to the actual amount of slave labour, they could not regard it as a standard up to which, or in any sustainable competition with which, free men will or ought to work; still less could they expect the improvement of the common field negro's*

* The distinction between the great mass of plantation slaves, those who wield the hoe and are driven, whom I call "*Field Negroes*," or "*Common Field Negroes*," and the drivers and artificers, called "*Head Negroes*," is one which I must request my readers always to bear in mind. The apologists of the system always artfully confound them together; and it is one of their great engines of deception. The latter, from the nature of their occupations, cannot be *driven*, or worked to any destructive excess. The same is more obviously the case with domestics.

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condition, or the attainment of his freedom, by the fruits of supererogatory toil.

Another reason for the exclusive preference I mean to give to the topics of labour and maintenance is, that the generality of the economical oppressions they involve makes them undeniably fair characteristics, not to say essential properties, of the system at large; and will enable me more clearly in the sequel to prove the hopelessness of its reformation by West Indian legislators; or, in other words, by the planters themselves.

When cases of excessive cruelties, or other particular abuses are adduced as arguments for reformation, the standing answer is, “that the instances of such crimes which we have “been able to establish incontrovertibly before the British “public are not numerous; and that it is harsh to characterize “the general practice by a few rare instances of individual “crimes, such as are to be found in every country, and under “the best institutions.”

The defence is plainly fallacious; for it infers the rarity of the crime, from that of its public detection and proof; whereas one of our most undeniable charges against the general system is, that the public detection and proof of such cruel abuses as slavery has manifestly a strong tendency to produce, are for the most part precluded both by manners and by laws. The *Lettres de Cachet* of the old French despotism, the infernal practices of the Inquisition, and every other form of tyranny on earth that has shrouded its abuses in darkness, by the terror of its power, and by withholding the means of an effectual appeal to the laws, might be defended precisely in the same way.

Besides, these apologists always take care to sink that most instructive and impressive circumstance in such adduced cases, the way in which the crime, when brought to light, is treated by the magistrates and juries, and by the popular feelings of the colony. A single conviction for a crime naturally odious might serve to indicate its great prevalence in any society, if the criminal, when convicted, not only escaped from any judicial punishment at all proportionate to his offence, and to the dangerous example of its impunity; but lost little or nothing of his former credit or popularity, and was

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received in the best company as favourably as before. How much more, if the popular odium due to the offender, was transferred to those who prosecuted, and brought him to conviction.*

Nevertheless, so difficult is it for the people of this happy country to conceive what the effects of private slavery are on the feelings of the masters; and on the popular sentiments of a community, all the free members of which are habituated to that harsh relation; and so strongly does our native humanity predispose us to believe that our fellow subjects in the colonies cannot ordinarily exercise with severity the despotic powers which they possess over their helpless dependents, that the clearest refutation of these apologies does not wholly remove their effect. The oppression is believed to be rare, merely because it cannot be proved to be common.

Much are such honest prepossessions strengthened, in many minds, by friendship or intimacy with West Indians resident among us: most of whom are or have been proprietors of estates in the sugar colonies, and all of them masters of slaves. I mean, not only through the partial and untrue accounts which such gentlemen naturally give of a system, in the character of which their own credit is involved, and which they too commonly know only from the report of men under the same bias; but because nothing perhaps has been seen in their manners when amongst us, to indicate feelings less liberal and humane than our own. It is therefore concluded that a system which such men are engaged in, have perhaps personally administered, and are desirous to uphold, cannot be, in its ordinary chaacter, extremely cruel and oppressive.

Such reasoners do not consider that the stern relation of slave master, one in which the conduct of their West Indian friend has never met their notice, avowedly involves and de-

* Those who are at all conversant with the works of anti-slavery writers need not be told that several most impressive examples of such a popular spirit in the sugar colonies have been established beyond denial. I have given one of them in Appendix, No. I. to my first volume; and in an Appendix to the present division of my work I mean to add some very recent and striking ones from decisive authorities.

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mands a discipline highly repugnant to their own benevolent feelings. They do not remember either that the same person, perhaps, or gentlemen whose apparent suavity and benignity of manners when in England were not inferior to his, reconciled themselves to all the now admitted atrocities of the inhuman slave trade, though it had long existed under their eyes; and had opposed pertinaciously its abolition for nearly twenty years. They do not well estimate the powerful influence of early prejudice, habit, and example, in warping the human feelings out of their ordinary current towards a particular object; and, what is the main source of these errors, they do not know (for West Indians *here* are always careful to conceal it) that in their friend's heart, there is a wide partition between the sympathies and duties that belong to a white fellow-being and to a black one. If such considerations were not put out of the account, thinking men would no more rely on the humane treatment of negro slaves in the West Indies, from what they see of their masters in England, than on that of the convicts in the House of Correction, or the patients in a mad-house, on the score of their keeper's general manners towards those who are not in his custody, or whose interference and control he apprehends.

Still, however, this source of error, assiduously cherished as it is by the colonial party, greatly prejudices the cause of the unfortunate slaves; among the many grievous peculiarities of whose lot it is, that their cruel state is unseen in the country whose power maintains it, and that *they* are personally strangers, while *their oppressors* are companions and familiar friends, to the lawgivers, and the generous people, from whose sympathy alone they can ever obtain relief.

To shew that, in the excessive exaction of labour at least, the practice of slavery on sugar plantations is *universally* oppressive and cruel, will, I am aware, be to attack the adverse prejudices I have mentioned in their strongest intrenchments; but should I succeed in such an attempt with the public at large, as with patient and attentive readers I am sure of doing, there will be an end of all presumptions in favour of the system from the personal characters of those who are engaged in it.