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978-1-108-02070-1 - The British West India Colonies: In Connection with Slavery, Emancipation, etc.

Elizabeth Campbell

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION.

THE following pages were written in 1847 in British Guiana, and form part of a work which it was then intended to publish, in order to suggest means by which prosperity might be established in the West Indian Colonies.

The author had singularly favourable opportunities of becoming well acquainted with the evils which required to be removed, and the remedies to be applied, and she was desirous of treating the subject with that degree of calmness and moderation, which becomes a person who has no personal or party feelings to gratify, and who desires to allay animosities, and, as far as possible, to remove prejudices.

That slavery is a monstrous evil few persons who have been brought up in a free and Christian country will deny; but it is only due to our countrymen and women who hold property in the West Indian Colonies, which was at one time cultivated by slaves, to consider well the circumstances which might have given rise to their participation in slavery, and to admit and commend the readiness with which they assisted to emancipate their slaves, when the legislature and people of this country were prepared to help them in that great, beneficent, and necessary measure.

Shall we now leave them to struggle alone? Or, shall we not rather assist them by every means in our power to carry into full and prosperous effect the work to which we incited them, and in the results of which we take so deep an interest?

It is said that the West Indians have overcome their diffi-

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culties, and that they are now well able to compete with the slave-owners of Cuba and the Brazils. That may be very true as regards the great capitalists, who have survived the wreck of 1848; but, is it true as to the mass of the proprietors? How many estates have been abandoned? How many have passed, at merely nominal prices, into the hands of creditors and mortgagees? And what, as regards real freedom, is the condition of many thousands of those who have been made free by Act of Parliament? What, if freedom has been firmly established, is the meaning of the continued complaints of the "Anti-Slavery Reporter," with regard to the indentures of Africans, forced emigration obtained for the advantage of the few at the expense of the many, and the general want of a true representation of the people, either in the Parliament of the empire, the Houses of Assembly, or the Councils of Government?

Was it real, or only a qualified, freedom that the late Lord Grey, Lord Derby, Lord Glenelg, and the Parliament of England promised to all the inhabitants of our West Indian Colonies as the result of emancipation? It is now too late to say that the people are not fit for freedom. That should have been considered before, if indeed it is a subject which one man ought to consider in reference to another. If not fit, why not? And then, who were most to blame, the enslavers or the enslaved?

It is also an unquestioned fact that many thousands of persons, especially in Jamaica and British Guiana, who in 1833 were slaves, have purchased for themselves freehold estates, varying in extent from one to fifty acres; that they have made up roads, effected drainage, built houses, and planted provisions. The money wherewith to purchase these estates must have been obtained by labour; and when it is considered that the quantity of sugar now exported from the British West Indian Colonies is greatly on the increase, and that a great deal of labour has been abstracted from the estates in order to apply it to the cultivation by the people of their own freeholds, it cannot be doubted that freedom has on the whole been very advantageous to the community. On the other hand, the cultivation of cotton and coffee has greatly fallen

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off, and in some of the most healthy parts of Jamaica hundreds of acres of coffee are at present in what is called *ruinate*.

Our object should have been from the first, and it should be now, to render the colonists in general prosperous, to strengthen the connexion between the general Government and the people of the Colonies, to improve the African race through the freed men and women in the British West Indies, and thus to convert the evils of slavery, now we have put an end to it, into the means of promoting freedom in other countries, and extending its blessings to Africa itself.

Why should not all the benevolent men and women of England unite to realise the anticipations of the great men who devoted their lives to the abolition of slavery, and the emancipation of the negroes?

Why should not we assist the colonists in their present attempts to improve their manufactures, to render their countries healthful by drainage, and to substitute cattle and machinery for manual labour, wherever that may be practicable?

Now that we have, at an enormous expense of money and labour, given freedom to the slaves, ought we to withhold our sympathy from those whose fortunes have been sacrificed as the result of attempts to carry into effect the wise and benevolent designs of the mother country?

In the working out these objects many mistakes have been made by all parties and all governments; let us hope it is not too late to correct them.

LORD CARLISLE, than whom a more sincere patriot is not to be found, recently remarked "This is the question of the age;" and the late LORD SEAFORD, who had resided in the colony, said, "The Almighty has done everything for us in Jamaica, but we have done little hitherto for ourselves."

LORD HOWARD DE WALDEN, and many other proprietors, have spared no expense to improve their estates in Jamaica, and to advantage the people, and some important discoveries have recently been made on his lordship's estates, and still more important ones by Mr. Bessemer, in the process of manufacturing sugar. It is, perhaps, impossible to overrate the value of these discoveries; but it should not be forgotten that the

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slave-owners may avail themselves of them. If we allow them to get the start of us again, by the means of increased capital and improved machinery, it will hardly be fair to ascribe their prosperity to the advantage which they may be supposed to derive from slave-labour. I am persuaded this advantage has been greatly overrated, and that if capital were directed to thorough draining, the estates in British Guiana and the coast-lands of Jamaica, and the erection of public mills for the manufacture of sugar according to the new principle, in all the colonies, it would be found highly remunerative ; that many of the small freeholders and former managers of estates would turn their attention to the cultivation of canes as well as provisions, thus forming a middle-class, and that in the profits of manufacturers and merchants, as well as those which would arise from leasing or selling their surplus lands to voluntary settlers, the land-owners would find their true interest. Neither can it be doubted, that the beautiful mountains of Jamaica might be advantageously settled and cultivated by Europeans, and that free labourers in abundance might be found, either in the United States or in China, to drain and plant with sea-island cotton, always in profitable demand, the coast-lands of British Guiana, Dominica, and Trinidad.

Have the patriots, philanthropists, and Christians of England well considered what might have been the condition of millions yet in slavery in America, Cuba, Porto Rico, the Brazils, and Africa, at this moment, if proper attention had been paid to our West Indian colonies, and our experiment there had been made as successful in every respect as it might have been ?

I had the pleasure of some acquaintance with the late Mr. Wilberforce, Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, and Mr. Joseph John Gurney, and no one can more highly estimate than I do, their benevolent and noble exertions. Would that they were living now, or that it was in my power to induce all who revere their memory, and glory in their labours, to devote their energies to the completion of the work which is yet to be done, and can only be effected by the united, wise, and benevolent exertions of those who yet live. When Messrs. Sturge, Lloyd, and

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Hervey visited Jamaica, in 1837, they did me the honour of a visit, as did Mr. Thom, and the late Mr. Kimball, from the Northern States of America; and afterwards Mr. and Mrs. Candler, a deputation from the Society of Friends, in England. I cannot doubt that these true-hearted and enlightened friends of mankind, will take an interest in these pages, and that their continued and increased exertions in the cause may be safely relied on. They may not agree in all respects with the reasonings of the author, but they will, I am sure, appreciate her motives, and approve the candour, moderation, and courage, with which she has expressed her opinions.

Should the demand for the present publication justify it, that of the other parts of the work will speedily follow.

S. B.

Brixton, Surrey, Dec. 17, 1852.

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RELATION

OF

JAMAICA AND OTHER COLONIES TO ENGLAND.

It has been frequently asked, Of what use are the colonies to England? It may be that, as colonies, they are really of no advantage; that could they protect themselves as independent states, so as to exercise their industry and develop their resources in a manner equally successful, they would confer the same benefits on the country by which they have been planted as they do at present. But were the colonies blotted out of the map of existence, there is little doubt that Great Britain itself would sustain a serious loss. If the British colonies are of no advantage to the mother country, we must apply the same principle to the colonies of other European states in regard to the countries from which they have sprung. We must remember that had colonization never taken place, neither the United States nor the South American Republics could have existed. The aboriginal inhabitants of the New World would then have been left in undisturbed possession of their native soil, and unless there was any inevitable destiny, arising from the laws of nature, to render their extinction certain, they would doubtless at this moment be enjoying that measure of happiness, which a freedom from the restraints of civilized life, and an absence of its privileges, might afford them. The Africans might still have been as free as the government of their own chiefs would have permitted; or they might have been held in subjection by the Turks and

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Arabs. Their law might have been the Koran, and their destiny that of the Bedouin encampment, or the control of the Sultan or his vicegerents. We do not ask, at this moment, whether the happiness of mankind would thus have been promoted. We must believe that the Sovereign of the universe provides for the welfare of His creatures ; that even the wicked are His sword ; that He causes “ the wrath of man to praise Him, and that the remainder of that wrath He will restrain.” But the question arises, Has the benefit derived from these distant settlements been such as to repay the expenditure which has been lavished in fostering their growth ; to make amends for the lives which have been sacrificed to their sultry or insalubrious climates ; or to reward the nations of Europe for the cost of blood and treasure employed in defending them, and in settling the contests to which their possession has given rise, and of which matters affecting their interests have been the occasion ?

In the first place, we must consider that it is the duty of every state to provide facilities for the subsistence and the welfare of its members. Unless this is the case, for what purpose are laws and government necessary, or what object do they serve ? Might we not as well dispense with their assistance altogether, and act as our own separate inclinations or our sense of justice and propriety may direct ? The confusion to which such a state of things would give rise might be more in accordance with the nature of some minds, than the restraint imposed by the laws of the most wisely ordered community. But supposing it to be desirable that a settled form of government should be adopted, the protection of life itself is an object to be consulted before that of property, or even liberty. It is of little importance to individuals, whether they perish by the knife of the murderer, or whether by the institutions of society, they are reduced to such a state of destitution as to encounter a more lingering fate from an absolute want of the necessaries of life. Now it is generally considered that the more densely peopled countries of Europe do not contain within themselves the resources sufficient for maintaining their own population in such a state of comfort as they ought to

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enjoy ; indeed, that, in particular instances, without procuring a supply from some other quarter, starvation is nearly inevitable. And, this is the case after millions have abandoned the homes of their fathers to obtain the means of subsistence in another hemisphere. Had they not done so, we must suppose, either that their descendants would never have existed, or that, by pressing still further on the means of subsistence, they would have increased in an incalculable degree the miseries of destitution amongst those who have remained behind. But if the present inhabitants of Great Britain can obtain the necessaries of life within the country itself, why has so great an anxiety been evinced that they might be permitted to supply themselves from other quarters ? From whence, then, can an adequate supply be derived ? Scarcely from those countries that are placed in circumstances similar to those of Great Britain itself. They require what they can raise for the support of their own inhabitants. It is in those thinly peopled regions of the globe, where the land is far more than sufficient for the maintenance of those who are located upon it, that we may expect to find a superfluity of agricultural productions. The inhabitants of such countries chiefly devote themselves to the cultivation of the soil ; and it is more for their advantage to receive manufactured articles from those places where the density of the population, and accumulation of capital (only to be found in countries which have been long inhabited), afford facilities for the production of these manufactures, in exchange for the food or the raw material which they are enabled to raise, than to expend their time and ingenuity in ineffectual efforts to supply themselves with those products of labour and skill, for the creation of which their circumstances are not adapted.

But in applying these remarks to the West Indies, it is necessary to admit that they are less suited to the raising of the food, which the inhabitants of temperate countries require, than other places, the climate of which more resembles that of Europe. They are also less fitted than such portions of the globe to become the habitation of the more destitute inhabitants of the mother country, who, in removing to another soil, expect to support themselves by actual labour. But they are in a high

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degree capable of supplying many productions, which contribute greatly to the comfort of the inhabitants of Great Britain, and also the raw material necessary to, at least one, of the most important of its manufactures. It may be said that if the West Indies cease to yield these commodities, they can be procured on equally advantageous terms elsewhere. But are Cuba, Brazil, or the United States, capable of increasing their supply of sugar, coffee, or cotton, so as to make up for any deficiency in that which the West Indies can afford, without an extension of the slave trade? The inhabitants of uncivilized countries usually spend that time, which is not required for providing for their actual necessities, in enjoying the shade of their forests, the coolness of their seas or rivers, or in pursuing the tedious process of their imperfect manufactures; so that it would be necessary to introduce civilization amongst them before their labour, or their soil, could be made available to the purposes of Europeans. In countries so populous as China or India, the land appears to be barely sufficient for the support of its inhabitants: so that it could scarcely be appropriated to raising such agricultural productions as the inhabitants of Great Britain may require, without creating a deficiency of the means of subsistence likely to prove highly injurious to the native population. Unless, then, there are other countries combining the advantages of civilization with a greater abundance of fertile land than is necessary to supply the wants of their own population, it is still either to the free or the slave countries of the West Indies that Great Britain must look, chiefly, for sugar, for coffee, for cotton, and for other tropical productions. Admitting all that can be said in favour of free trade, it can scarcely be doubted from which of these two it is most desirable that the supply should be obtained.

But it has been shown that the colonies are also of importance to Great Britain, as affording to her superfluous population a habitation, in which, although they lose some of the advantages arising from a highly civilized state of society, they find a field in which to exercise their energies and their enterprize, and the means of providing for their own wants more advantageously than they might have been able to do

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had they remained at home, and also that they are enabled to labour more usefully to others, because possessing a greater command over those resources which the Almighty has provided for supplying the wants of His creatures, than they could have done where these resources had been already appropriated by others. Whether it is possible for the natives of cold countries to accommodate themselves to a tropical climate, to such a degree as to be able to encounter much exposure to the sun, or any arduous manual labour, consistently with their health and welfare, is usually regarded as a matter so doubtful, as not to warrant any conclusion in its favour, unless as the result of much observation and experience. But it can scarcely be denied, that there are parts of the West Indies, as the high lands of Jamaica, the sea coast of British Guiana (when properly drained and cultivated), and other places, in which Europeans, whose occupation requires only a moderate degree of exercise, and affords them the opportunity of being sheltered from the direct rays of the sun during the hottest part of the day, may, if they will only exercise a fair measure of caution, at least in the first instance, enjoy as much health as they could do in any part of the world. To those persons of delicate constitution, who suffer particularly from the severe cold of a northern winter, the change under such circumstances, might be highly beneficial. Now it is not only the labouring classes in the mother country who find it difficult to provide for themselves and their families those means of subsistence which are not merely called for by their absolute necessities, but suited to their previous habits, and to the station of society in which they have been accustomed to move. There is a class, above that of mere labourers, the number of which must increase as the general diffusion of education renders the candidates, for all those situations in which mental qualifications are required, rather than physical, more numerous. The changes which are taking place in the state of society, and which evince a disposition rather to provide for the actual necessities of the most indigent portion of the community, than to regard the interests of the higher and middling classes, whose welfare has hitherto been chiefly consulted, may possibly increase the number of