

RICHARD B. SHERIDAN

Sadly, Dr. Richard B. Sheridan passed away in April 2002. We are publishing this article posthumously with the assistance of Roderick A. MacDonald, who agreed to help us publish the text in a way we think accords with Professor Sheridan's intentions.

THE CONDITION OF THE SLAVES ON THE SUGAR
PLANTATIONS OF SIR JOHN GLADSTONE IN THE
COLONY OF DEMERARA, 1812-49

JOHN GLADSTONE: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Sir John Gladstone (1764-1851) was a prominent Liverpool merchant, member of parliament, and father of a prime minister. He owned slaves of African origin in the South American colony of Demerara who led a slave rebellion that stands out in the annals of servile revolts. Together with their white managers, Gladstone's slaves in Demerara and Jamaica produced a large part of his fortune, which elevated his family from the status of shopkeeper and corn merchant at Leith, Scotland, to Liverpool merchant prince with commercial, financial, and political ties that extended from the East Indies to the West Indies.

Sir John was born at Leith, Scotland, on December 11, 1764, the son of Helen and Thomas Gladstone. He was one of sixteen children, of whom four were lost in infancy. At the age of thirteen, John was taken from school and apprenticed to the manager of a roperie and sailcloth company in preparation for a career in the "Mercantile Part of Business and in Keeping Regular Accounts and Books." After finishing his apprenticeship, he entered his father's corn and chandlery business at Leith. As a young supercargo, or traveling merchant, he saw "something of the world of northern Europe" and was able "to pit his wits against the foreigner on alien soil" (Checkland 1971:13). On May 1, 1787, John Gladstone became a partner with Edgar Corrie of Liverpool for a term of fourteen years. There he came in contact with some of the leading traders of the day. He dispatched the first vessel which sailed from Liverpool to Calcutta after the trade of the East Indies had been thrown open. After a decade of trade, shipping, and finance in the West Indies and

Demerara, Gladstone acquired a one-half interest in a sugar plantation in Demerara.¹

In 1792 Sir John married Jane, daughter of Joseph Hall of Liverpool, who died without issue. He married, secondly, on April 29, 1800, Anne, daughter of Annie and Andrew Robertson, Esq., provost of Dingwall, Ross-shire, Scotland. By her he was the father of four sons and two daughters. Sir Thomas Gladstone, the eldest son and second baronet was a Conservative member of parliament. Robertson, the second son, joined the partnership with his father and George Grant. John Neilson, the third son, was a captain in the navy and a member of parliament. William Ewart, the fourth son, was the eminent statesman who was four times prime minister. The daughters were Anne Mackenzie and Helen Jane, both unmarried. John Gladstone sat in parliament for many years, first as a Liberal. His admiration for George Canning, the prime minister, led to a change in his political allegiance, and he became a staunch Tory. Gladstone took a prominent part in the support of charitable and religious institutions. He was created a baronet by Sir Robert Peel on July 18, 1846, and died December 5, 1851 (Stephen & Lee 1917; Matthew 1986: 3-9, 28, 76-78, 131, 251).

POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF DEMERARA

The condition of the slaves on the Gladstone plantations must be seen against the background of the political, social, and economic history of Demerara as well as the events during the period of this study. Guiana is the name given to the region of northeast South America which now includes French Guiana, Suriname, and Guyana. In 1621 the first Dutch West India Company was chartered and Dutch traders began to explore the interior of Guiana. The shift from trade to the more profitable sugar production was accelerated during the early decades of the seventeenth century. "By 1704," as Raymond T. Smith (1962:15) observes, "the Company operated some plantations on the river banks near Fort Kijkoveral and private cultivations were also spreading slowly down the river banks." A later period of growth came from 1742 to 1772 under the direction of Laurens Storm van 's-Gravesande, the Secretary of the Dutch West India Company. He opened the Demerara region to settle-

1. I am indebted to Sir William Gladstone for granting permission to search the Glynne-Gladstone MSS at the Flintshire Record Office, North Wales, and to quote extracts from these papers. I am also indebted to the late Professor Sidney G. Checkland, Chair, Department of Economic History, University of Glasgow, for kindly assisting me with the Gladstone family history with special reference to Demerara and Jamaica. And finally I am grateful for the help of the late Professor Isaac Dookhan, the late Professor Douglas Hall, and Professor Richard A. Lobdell.

ment and encouraged settlers from other nations, mainly British, to settle newly opened lands. British planters from Barbados and the Leeward Islands played a prominent role in the development of Essequibo and Demerara. By 1760, according to Storm van 's-Gravesande, British settlers were in a majority in Demerara (Smith 1962). Nine years later they owned fifty-six plantations and managed others for absentee Dutch proprietors. By 1813, most of the white settlers were British (Sheridan 1974:442-44; see also Lobdell 1966).

According to Rev. G.C. Edmundson, the British occupation set in motion "a constant flow of new settlers from the British West Indies, and with the help of British capital the colonies entered upon a period of increasing prosperity." During this period of occupation, "more and more plantations of sugar, cotton and coffee fell into Anglo-Scottish hands, but their prosperity, which depended on Negro labour, was considerably checked after 1807 by the abolition of the slave trade. The anglicization of the Colonies meanwhile went on apace" (Edmundson 1923:6-7). Demerara, Essequibo, and Berbice were united into the colony of British Guiana in 1831.

By comparison with other British Caribbean sugar colonies, of which Jamaica was the largest and of greatest economic importance, the planters of Demerara and its sister colonies differed markedly in their control of the water resources and in other respects. Dr. John Hancock, who practiced medicine in Demerara in the period of this study, wrote as follows of the transfer of hydraulic society from the Netherlands to British Guiana:

None but Hollanders could ever on such a continent, have thought of robbing the sea, or fencing it out from a swampy coast with such intense labour as is found continually necessary to keep up the cultivation. The original Dutch colonists, indeed, seem to have sought, in this country, only another Holland, and they, in a district boundlessly rich and uncultivated, set, at an early period, about gaining land from the sea! They accordingly planted themselves on the muddy land of the sea-shore, where they had the comforting reflection that they must necessarily be drowned by the sea on one side or by the *bush-water* on the other, unless they were protected by dykes. (Hancock 1835:6)

In their essay entitled, "Slavery and Slave Culture in a Hydraulic Society: Suriname," Gert Oostindie and Alex Van Stipriaan (1995) have thought through the implications of different ecological adaptations of the plantation model with special reference to Suriname and the Guyanas in general. They focus attention on significant variation of material conditions of the *polder* plantations located on the low land reclaimed from the sea by dikes, dams, canals, trenches, and other earthen barriers. "Oral tradition suggests," according to the authors, "that the arduous digging of *polder* canals and trenches in the heavy sea clay of the coastal plains provoked deep resentment and overt slave resistance." Furthermore, "[t]he negative impact of water-related labor is also underlined by the fact that, during the second half of the eighteenth

century, the number of slaves running away from sugar plantations were [*sic* was] two to four times as high as that from coffee estates" (Oostindie & Van Stipriaan 1995:87; see also Beachey 1957:94-98).

GLADSTONE'S DEMERARA PLANTATIONS

John Gladstone's involvement with plantations was precipitated by financial interest. Although he did not abandon his trade to India, he found it was generally more profitable to engage in trade, shipping, and finance with the plantation colonies in the West Indies and Guianas. Traders made a profit on supplies sent out from Britain, they earned a rate of interest on lending money, and a commission on gross sales of West India commodities in the home market. By 1803 and 1804, Gladstone was making large purchases of sugar and cotton in the West Indies, and especially Demerara. While it was customary for the planters to run up short-term debts, a considerable number went further in debt and incurred mortgage debts which were often foreclosed by the mortgagees. Gladstone began to acquire plantations in Demerara in 1812 with a one-half interest in plantation Success (Checkland 1971:59). Four years later he acquired full ownership of this plantation, which was one of the largest and most productive properties in Demerara (Checkland 1971:123). Soon after the acquisition he changed it from growing coffee to sugar production and more than doubled the gang of slaves from 160 to near 330 (Checkland 1954).

In addition to Success, John Gladstone acquired six plantations during the mid and late 1820s. They were estates which he and his partners had supplied with British and North American plantation inputs and marketed the slave-produced staples – all transported in the company's ships. The resident and absentee owners of the estates had died or were living in Europe, leaving behind debts and heirs living in Europe who, in several cases, were forced to sell their mortgaged estates at sacrifice prices. Gladstone's seven estates in Demerara were as follows: Success, Wales, Waller's Delight, Covenden, Hampton Court, Vreedenhoop, and Vreedestein. Approximately 170 slaves were transferred from Waller's Delight to Success estate. In October 1828, 200 slaves were transferred from Covenden to Vreedenhoop estate. Waller's Delight and Covenden had both been coffee properties. As a multiple plantation owner, Gladstone and his agents were able to readjust and re-allocate the slaves, livestock, and buildings on the properties he owned. While profits were enhanced by these and other measures, the welfare of the slaves was often impaired by heavier workloads and adjustments in the provision of living quarters, hospitals, and family and communal life (Checkland 1954, 1971; Rivière 1968:291-92).

REV. JOHN SMITH, GLADSTONE, AND THE DEMERARA SLAVE
REVOLT OF 1823

For several months in 1823, the lives of the inhabitants of plantations in Demerara were disrupted by a slave revolt that had its origin at the center of the British Empire at Whitehall. In May of that year, Thomas Fowell Buxton introduced in the House of Commons his famous resolution, “[t]hat the state of slavery is repugnant to the principles of the British constitution and of the Christian religion, and that it ought to be abolished gradually throughout the British colonies” (Klingberg 1926:195). After debate in the House, Lord Bathurst, the Colonial Secretary, circulated a dispatch for Demerara, instructing the Court of Policy – a legislative assembly carried over from Dutch days – to adopt the resolutions concerning the amelioration of the condition of the slaves. The resolutions called for the prohibition of the flogging of female slaves, the prohibition of the driving of slaves in their field labor by the sound of the whip, and of the arbitrary infliction of it by the driver as a stimulus to labor. Lieutenant Governor John Murray received Bathurst’s dispatch on July 7, 1823, but it was not until the end of August that the Court of Policy decided to adopt the resolutions.

Reverend John Smith and his wife arrived in Demerara from England in February, 1817, where he took up his ministry at the chapel of the London Missionary Society on the Le Resouvenir sugar plantation, six miles from Georgetown, the port city and capital. He was received with enthusiasm by large congregations of slaves, several of whom were to become deacons of the church. He was also met with opposition from Governor Murray and many planters, managers, and overseers who claimed that his chapel services diverted the slaves from their expected labors. Smith was warned by the plantocracy to say nothing that would encourage the slaves to be displeased with their masters or dissatisfied with their status in society. They were not to be emancipated, but to be afforded the consolation of religion. Moreover, Missionary Smith was forbidden to teach the slaves to read (Jakobsson 1972:301-10; Viotti da Costa 1994).

On August 21, 1823, a few days before John Smith was arrested and charged with complicity in the slave revolt, he wrote a letter to George Burder, Secretary of the London Missionary Society, of which the following extracts are quoted:

These are the facts of the case! The causes which have brought about this state of things, are, in my opinion, too obvious to be mistaken. Ever since I have been in the colony, the slaves have been most grievously oppressed. A most immoderate quantity of work has, very generally, been exacted of them, not excepting women far advanced in pregnancy. When sick, they have been commonly neglected, ill treated, or half starved. Their punishments have been frequent and severe. Redress they have so seldom been able to obtain, that many of them have long discontinued to seek it, even when they have been notoriously wronged. (Smith, quoted in Jakobsson 1972:323)

Smith wrote further that although the whip had been used with an unsparing hand, he believed that the slaves had not been more frequently or more severely flogged than formerly. Nevertheless, the planters did not appear to have considered that "the increase of knowledge among the slaves required that an alteration should be made in the mode of treating them" (Smith, quoted in Jakobsson 1972:323).

Generally speaking, the revolt broke out among the slaves because they believed they had been granted rights by Parliament that their masters were withholding. The adjoining plantations, Success and Le Resouvenir, were focal points of the rebellion, which broke out on the night of August 18, 1823. The chief leader was Jack Gladstone, a cooper on Success, who conspired with several other slave leaders to incite their followers to revolt. Closely associated with Jack was his father, Quamina, a carpenter on Success, and head deacon of the chapel on Le Resouvenir. The rebellion started on Success and was concentrated in a twenty-five-mile coastal strip to the east of the Demerara River and south of Georgetown. It has been estimated that, out of 75,000 slaves in the United Colony of Demerara and Essequibo, about 13,000 took part in the rising. They belonged to thirty-seven out of the three hundred and fifty estates in the colony. The white inhabitants were imprisoned or put in the stocks and their houses ransacked for arms. Three white civilians were killed, but no military or militiamen. William Law Mathieson (1926:130-31) says that "for several days small bodies of regulars and militia were engaged in dispersing the rebels, who had a few muskets and pistols, but were armed mostly with 'machets' or cane-knives." Approximately 250 slaves were either killed in the insurrection or executed after they were tried and found guilty. Ten of the fifty-one slaves who were condemned to death were decapitated and their heads stuck on poles on the roadside. Jack Gladstone was banished to the British colony of St. Lucia in the West Indies. According to Emilia Viotti da Costa (1994:244), "A letter his owner, the powerful and prestigious John Gladstone, sent on his behalf may explain this decision that saved his life" (see also Craton 1982:267-69, 273-88).

Smith was charged at the trial with promoting discontent and dissatisfaction in the minds of the slaves toward their lawful masters, managers, and overseers, thereby intending to excite the slaves to revolt (Jakobsson 1972:325-27). He was found guilty of the charges by a court martial and sentenced to death by hanging, with a recommendation of mercy. He was reprieved by King George IV, but it came too late to save the missionary who died in a small damp prison room from consumption (Jakobsson 1972; Craton 1982).

John Gladstone expressed anger at the negative publicity directed to himself and his slaves, and especially to the veracity of the entry in the journal of John Smith, dated August 30, 1817: "The Negroes of Success have complained to me lately of excessive labour and very severe treatment. I told one

of their overseers that I thought they would work the people to death" (Smith, quoted in Rivière 1968:287). Gladstone wrote to William A. Hankey, an official of the London Missionary Society, on December 24, 1824, declaring these assertions to be false and wholly unfounded. He claimed that the labor required from his slaves had always been moderate, and when the cultivation was changed from cotton to sugar, the number of the gang was about doubled from 160 to near 330 without any complaint on their part. He wrote that his

intentions have ever been to treat my people with kindness in the attention to their wants of every description, and to grant them every reasonable and practicable indulgence; these instructions have been strictly adhered to by my Attorney & Manager ... therefore, from you and from your Society, I claim that Justice and Protection to which I am entitled.²

Hankey replied to Gladstone's letter, saying that the passage from John Smith's *Journal* was included in a publication intended to defend Gladstone's character by proving

how little a non-resident proprietor can control the conduct of his Agents ... Indeed it would be no forced construction to say that the observation serves its point, from the inference that Mr G[ladstone] is among the most humane of those absent proprietors of W[est] Indian property.³

JAMES CROPPER AND GLADSTONE DEBATE THE CONDITIONS OF SLAVERY

From the standpoint of the slaves on his Demerara plantations, the year 1823 was eventful for John Gladstone. In Parliament, he listened with great concern to speeches by Buxton and Canning calling for the amelioration of slavery in the West Indies. The same year saw the involvement of his own slaves in the insurrection in Demerara. In Liverpool he was engaged in a heated debate with James Cropper, a fellow-townsmen, on the state of slavery. The debate was first published in two local newspapers, and later in a pamphlet in February 1824 by the West India Association of Liverpool, under the short title: *The Correspondence Between John Gladstone, Esq., M.P. and James Cropper, Esq.*⁴

2. Flintshire Record Office (FRO), Hawarden, Wales, letter from Gladstone to Hankey, December 20, 1824, in John Gladstone's Letterbook, Glynne-Gladstone MSS, pp. 1-2.
3. FRO, letter from Hankey to Gladstone, December 29, 1824, John Gladstone's Letterbook, Glynne-Gladstone MSS, p. 5.
4. *The Correspondence Between John Gladstone, Esq., M.P. and James Cropper, Esq., on the Present State of Slavery in the British West Indies and in the United States of America; and on the Importation of Sugar from the British Settlements in India. With an Appendix Containing Several Papers on the Subject of Slavery.* (Liverpool: Liverpool West India Association, 1824) cited hereinafter as *Gladstone-Cropper Correspondence*.

James Cropper (1773-1840), merchant and philanthropist, was the son of Thomas and Rebecca Cropper, who, like their son, were Quakers. He was born at Winstanley in Lancashire. At the age of seventeen he entered as an apprentice in the house of the Rathbone Brothers, who were American merchants in Liverpool. He was the founder of the well-known Liverpool mercantile house of Cropper, Benson & Company. The company's import trade included American cotton and Indian sugar. Cropper took a lively interest in religious and philanthropic activities, especially the abolition of slavery in the West Indies.

James Cropper began the debate with a letter entitled, "Impolicy of Slavery." In the opening paragraph he called attention to the cruelty and injustice of slavery wherever it had spread over the face of the earth. He wrote that "it had long been a matter of public notoriety, that the Slaves in the West Indies are degradingly driven, like cattle, by the whip at their labour, which, for nearly half the year lasts for one-half the night, as well as the whole day!"⁵ Furthermore, he wrote that the slaves were held and dealt with as property, often branded with a hot iron, liable to be sold at the will of their master, compelled to work on the Sabbath for their own subsistence, and denied the advantages of religious instruction. He argued that if the slaves in the West Indies were freed, they would not only produce more cane sugar and other tropical commodities, but also consume much more of British manufactures. "Thus would Great Britain find within her own dominions abundant scope for the extension of her commerce, and share with the rest of the world the vast field which would be opened beyond them."⁶

Gladstone replied to Cropper on September 27, 1823, with reference to the habits of the slaves, the regulation of their labor, and their general treatment in the colonies of Demerara, Essequibo, and Berbice. "There, night labour of the Slaves is now unknown," he wrote. "Even on Sugar Estates, the grinding [of the canes] ceases at sunset; and the boilers, the only parties that remain longer, finish cleaning up before nine o'clock."⁷ Their general food, in addition to salt fish and occasionally salted provisions, consisted of plantains which they preferred to other food. Plantains were cultivated in the ordinary daily work of each estate, or purchased when deficient, and they were supplied with more than they could consume. The slaves were provided with clothing that was suitable for the climate and their situation. "They have the Sabbath and their other holydays to dispose of, for the purpose of religion, if so inclined."⁸ Gladstone wrote that the slaves had ample spare time on their working days for attending to the raising of their livestock for sale and for cultivating their small gardens.

5. *Liverpool Mercury*, October 31, 1823.
6. *Gladstone-Cropper Correspondence*, pp. 1-15.
7. *Gladstone-Cropper Correspondence*, pp. 1-15.
8. *Gladstone-Cropper Correspondence*, pp. 1-15.

The Slave, when guilty of crime, is tried in the same manner as his master. No driver or overseer can punish beyond six lashes for any offense. Connexion by marriage is encouraged, and its lawful fruits of increase rewarded. Families cannot be separated, but, when disposed of, must be sold together. In cases of Sickness, able medical aid is provided; and in old age, when invalided, every comfort is afforded and continued. Their dwellings are roomy and commodious, their labour regulated and moderate.⁹

By way of a caveat, Gladstone admitted that there were some exceptions to his description of slavery in Demerara, "for there was no society of which worthless and wicked individuals did not form a part." Among the wicked individuals, in his opinion, were the slave emancipators in England and "the dangerous doctrines of their misguided agents" in the colonies.¹⁰

Gladstone felt insulted when he read that Cropper sneered at the idea of a West Indian planter residing in England and being a member of the Bible Society and active in promoting the circulation of the sacred book. Cropper was said to have expressed his surprise that Gladstone "should wish to promote the improvement and to better the condition of the Slaves after having stated, that the chief ringleaders of the Demerara insurrection were from estates where they had received most indulgences."¹¹ Gladstone wrote that the planters of Demerara were most desirous, as far as their means would enable them, to provide that the religious instruction of the slaves should come from "Clergymen of the Established Churches, and not from the Missionary Societies."¹²

James Cropper, in his final letter of the debate, declared that the decrease of population was incontrovertible proof of insufficient food, or forced labor, where a man was not allowed to be his own judge of the fitness of his body to bear it. He wrote that different reasons had been given for the decrease of the slaves in the sugar colonies:

In Demerara, where the importations [from Africa] seem to have been most recent and extensive, and where about one-half the Slaves, in 1817, were Africans, one-eighth or one-ninth of the population are an excess of males; but this is no adequate cause of the decrease.¹³

Furthermore, he dismissed the argument of the planters that promiscuous sexual intercourse, to which the slaves from Africa were allegedly so much

9. *Gladstone-Cropper Correspondence*, pp. 1-15.

10. *Gladstone-Cropper Correspondence*, pp. 1-15; see also *Liverpool Courier*, November 27, 1823.

11. *Gladstone-Cropper Correspondence*, pp. 1-15.

12. *Gladstone-Cropper Correspondence*, pp. 1-15; see also *Liverpool Courier*, December 14 and 13, 1823.

13. *Gladstone-Cropper Correspondence*, pp. 1-15.

addicted, was a valid reason for the low birthrate. From the preceding facts he presented, Cropper said he was forced to the conclusion that the ill-treatment of the slaves had kept down the slave population.

John Gladstone, on the contrary, devoted much attention in his contributions to the debate with Cropper to the demographic and social characteristics of slavery in Demerara. He referred to the Slave Registrar's Triennial Report for the colony of Demerara, made up to September 1, 1823. The report showed that there remained in the colony, of African males, 16,258, of African females, 9,745. He wrote that a very large proportion of the Creole population was under twenty years of age, while many of the African Negroes were far advanced in years. "Thus there is" he wrote, "for the purpose of natural increase an unproductive number of 5,513 males, and it is well known, that on the part of the part of the imported Africans, there was a dislike to marriage, or restricted intercourse between the sexes." Gladstone predicted that when the proportion of the sexes became equal, as they then were in the United States, "we may confidently expect the increase from natural causes and good management alone."¹⁴

Checkland (1971:191-92) says that Cropper's position was anomalous, since his Liverpool firm was among the greatest importers of American slave-grown cotton, and he wanted to develop India as a source of sugar and remove tariff preferences and slave labor which gave encouragement to West Indian planters. Largely as a result of their debate, the long-standing friendship between Gladstone and Cropper was utterly destroyed.

JOHN MACLEAN'S BENIGN DESCRIPTION OF SLAVERY AT VREEDENHOOP

The lengthy and bitter debate between Cropper and Gladstone spurred further investigations into the working conditions of Gladstone's slaves. On March 3, 1824, John MacLean, Jr., manager of Vreedenhoop estate on the east coast of Demerara, wrote a letter to Alexander McDonnell, Esq., Secretary of "The Committee of the Inhabitants of Demerara." McDonnell had applied to MacLean and other "respectable medical practitioners and managers residing in different parts of the colony, for reports illustrative of the general treatment of the slaves under their charge" (McDonnell 1824:146). These reports were said to be scrupulously framed and were furnished for the purpose of drafting a general report applicable to the colony as a whole. No doubt these reports were published to demonstrate the positive characteristics of slavery

14. *Gladstone-Cropper Correspondence*, pp. 1-15; see also *Liverpool Courier*, 4 December 1823.

in the aftermath of the servile rebellion of the previous year. The short title of McDonnell's pamphlet is *Considerations on Negro Slavery*.

John MacLean wrote that he had resided constantly in the colonies of Guiana for nearly fourteen years. He was first employed on a plantation on the east coast of Demerara in the capacity of manager for six years. It had a labor force of about 450 slaves, and was cultivated in coffee and cotton, and later converted to sugar. In 1816, MacLean removed for several years to a Demerara cotton estate with 306 slaves, after which he was an attorney and manager for three years of a sugar plantation in the colony of Berbice with a gang of 325 slaves. He wrote that his experience on the above estates gave him "a perfect conviction that no man among us is so callous to the sufferings of a fellow-creature as to treat a sick negro with the smallest shadow of neglect" (McDonnell 1824:156).

MacLean came to Vreedenhoop estate in April, 1822, and found a gang of 356 slaves cultivating sugar cane and coffee. He wrote that the slave houses were made of hardwood frames and the roofs covered with shingles; they were divided into commodious and comfortable apartments for the different families. Clothing was sent from England annually and distributed among the slaves. There were 200 acres on the estate bearing plantains and the slaves were allowed as many bunches as they wished, provided they did not sell any. Fish and salt were distributed to each family weekly and occasionally rum and tobacco.

For the medical treatment of the slaves, the hospital and lying-in rooms were said to be of the most comfortable construction with apartments for the different sexes, and furnished with every convenience that could contribute to the ease and eventual recovery of the sick. Patients were supplied with beef, pork, barley, and wine. They were visited almost every day by the medical practitioner, who furnished an abundance of medicines. The doctor was assisted by two nurses. MacLean said he never saw a sick slave die from a circumstance that human endeavors or foresight could prevent.¹⁵

Regarding the labor of the slaves, MacLean wrote that "the quantity of work required of an able negro daily, depends, in a great measure, on the state of the soil, and, like all general rules, must vary according to circumstances" (McDonnell 1824:156). He went on to state the workday requirements for holing lands in preparation for planting cane, weeding, cutting, and carrying canes to the mill, and carrying green bagasse. He said he put two men to every furnace, three to carrying dry bagasse for fuel, and one boilerman to every copper boiler. For trenching or shoveling soil that washed down the trenches from the back-lands, he gave a prime man a rood (a linear measure of seven

15. For the slave hospitals and medical personnel in British Guiana, see Sheridan 1985:279-80.

or eight yards) of a twelve-foot trench, four feet deep. "If a navigable canal, and 5 feet deep, with parapet, I give only 10 feet" (McDonnell 1824:157). Furthermore, whatever the size or dimensions of a drain, trench, or canal might be, he expected a prime slave to dig 550 to 600 cubic feet of earth per day (McDonnell 1824:154-58).

John MacLean closed his letter with comments on the condition of the slaves on Vreedenhoop plantation. He said that exclusive of the indulgences already mentioned, the slaves had extensive fields in the most productive soil in the back-lands of Demerara, which were cultivated in various roots and vegetables. About their houses they had "every description of feathered stock peculiar to this country for which they effected a ready sale, either in their respective districts, or at the town market" (McDonnell 1824:158). On Sundays the slaves attended public worship as frequently as they wished. He said he gave them passes and letters to get them baptized. MacLean declared that before the insurrection of 1823, the slaves enjoyed every comfort, and he was convinced that slavery was only known to them by name. He lamented the fact that

their minds were inflamed by ambiguous preaching, and religious sentences, selected from various books, and explained in language strongly calculated to impress them with the idea that their condition ought to be better, and that their masters were their enemies, inasmuch as they deprived them of supposed rights. (McDonnell 1824:158)

THE AMELIORATION ORDINANCE OF 1826

Efforts to improve the condition of the slaves by means of public policy and practice were revived and expanded in the period following the Demerara slave revolt of 1823. By the terms of the Amelioration Ordinance which took effect on January 1, 1826, a protector of slaves was appointed, slaves were made immune from labor on Sunday, and they were provided with religious instruction. Furthermore, field work was limited to the hours from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., with a midday intermission of two hours; the whipping of women was abolished; the punishment of men was limited to twenty-five lashes; a record of punishments was to be kept; slaves were accorded the privilege of marriage, of acquiring and holding property, and of purchasing their freedom (Dalton 1855:364-65; Williams 1964:197-99). The office of the Protector of Slaves in British Guiana was a "delusion," according to Eric Williams. The incumbent wrote in 1832, "I am desperately unpopular" (quoted in Williams 1964:199).

From the tenor of the dispatches he received from Demerara, it is probably true to say that John Gladstone believed that his slaves were so well treated that they did not need the sanctions of the amelioration law. Almost all

of these dispatches came from one source; they were written by Frederick Cort, who was Gladstone's attorney in Demerara. Shortly before the slave insurrection of 1823, Gladstone pressed Cort for information on the condition of the slaves on Success and other plantations in the colony. Cort wrote back that it was seldom necessary to punish the slaves, that they could make considerable money by selling the surplus produce of their provision grounds, and that they were generally happy and contented. Subsequent to the revolt, the secretary of the London Missionary Society tried to warn Gladstone that he had been deceived by Cort, but Gladstone continued to identify himself with Cort and his other agents (Checkland 1971).

A GLADSTONE VISITS DEMERARA, 1828: MISMANAGEMENT AND NEGLECT REVEALED

John Gladstone never set foot on the soils of Demerara and Jamaica; Frederick Cort, his attorney in Demerara, was the principal source of Gladstone's information from Demerara. Robertson, his second son and future partner, proposed in 1828 that he visit the West Indies and inspect the estates and help to determine whether or not to retain Cort in his powerful position. Robertson stayed in Demerara three-and-a-half months from November 22, 1828 to March 3, 1829. "Cort was found to be an idler and a deceiver. One estate after another had been mismanaged, both those owned by Gladstone and those he administered for others."¹⁶ He was said to have never made plantership a study and had neglected the welfare of the slaves. Robertson was astonished that Cort could have contrived to keep up his connection with John Gladstone. According to Checkland (1971:199),

Cort had succumbed to the temptations of a life in which the degrading relations of a slave society, the petty politics and even pettier jealousies of the colony, the struggles over mortgages and foreclosures and the lack of any supervision of himself had induced habits of idleness and specious self-justification.

Cort was summarily dismissed and replaced by John MacLean, the long-time manager of Vreedenhoop estate.

At least two examples of Cort's callous attitude toward the slaves and his mismanagement of the Gladstone estates are extant in the Gladstones's family records. Cort wrote to John Gladstone on September 6, 1828 that there had

16. FRO, letter from Robertson Gladstone to John Gladstone, dated Philadelphia, May 17, 1829, Glynne-Gladstone MSS.

been "a sad continuance of sickness at Success last month, but the mortality has been confined to useless Invalids and two children."¹⁷

In looking over the journal for Success estate for the greater part of the year 1828, Robertson Gladstone discovered that nearly three-fourths of the deaths were brought on and occasioned by dysentery. When he spoke to Cort about his finding, "he did not at the time evidently at all relish my investigation of the matter."¹⁸ Cort, however, accompanied Gladstone to the trench from which the slaves took their drinking and cooking water which was "very thickly impregnated with earthy and vegetable matter,"¹⁹ which Gladstone was led to believe was the cause of so many cases of dysentery. It was pointed out that, by contrast, the slaves at Vreedenhoop estate obtained their water from a large tank that collected rainwater and that the incidence of deaths from dysentery was minimal. Gladstone concluded that it was a well-known fact that nothing produced dysentery more effectually than bad water. Cort was said "to have a sort of feeling of regret, that the matter was not looked into sooner, but unfortunately his repentance came rather late."²⁰

Although Robertson Gladstone was diligent in his inspection of his father's plantations and slaves in Demerara, he formed a view of the condition of the slaves that conformed closely to that of Frederick Cort and other plantation attorneys and managers. Gladstone wrote in his journal in 1829 that the slaves enjoyed every comfort and they were "contented and happy, and will remain so, if allowed to live undisturbed by the meddling and ill disposed" (Robertson Gladstone, quoted in Checkland 1971:200). Finding this viewpoint disturbing, Checkland (1971:200) asked the following questions: "Was Robertson hoodwinked by the attorney and managers, were his observations superficial, was he the victim of preconception, was he seeking to please his father, or is it possible that the life of the negro had been misrepresented by the abolitionists?" While all of these explanations are plausible, the most likely one is that Robertson was hoodwinked by the attorney and managers. Absentee proprietors or their agents who went to the West Indies on inspection tours were generally the guests of the attorneys or managers in the great house, where they were cared for by household and skilled slaves who were on their best behavior, displaying a cheerful and affectionate demeanor under a mild discipline. The field slaves, on the other hand, were less approachable

17. FRO, letter from Frederick Cort to John Gladstone, September 6, 1828, John Gladstone MSS CH55, Glynne-Gladstone MSS.

18. FRO, letter from Robertson Gladstone to John Gladstone, dated Plantation Vreedenhoop, Demerara, January 11, 1829, Glynne-Gladstone MSS, CH79.

19. FRO, letter from Robertson Gladstone to John Gladstone, dated Plantation Vreedenhoop, Demerara, January 11, 1829, Glynne-Gladstone MSS, CH79.

20. FRO, letter from Robertson Gladstone to John Gladstone, dated Plantation Vreedenhoop, Demerara, January 11, 1829, Glynne-Gladstone MSS, CH79.

and less likely to communicate their grievances to the visitor for fear of severe punishment after the visitor's departure. The myth of the happy and contented slave was thus perpetuated in the metropolis by the limited and distorted views regarding the condition of the slaves.

After replacing Frederick Cort as John Gladstone's attorney in Demerara, John MacLean claimed that he had fully conformed to Gladstone's instructions. "I am most particular," he wrote, "as to punishments, food and clothing, and attention to the slaves when sick" (McLean, quoted in Checkland 1971:265). But he was resistant to certain aspects of Gladstone's concern for slave welfare, and innovations in the technology of sugar manufacture. Intimating that he had superior knowledge of the "Negro character," MacLean warned Gladstone that the granting of indulgences to the slaves would be construed as obligations to which they were entitled and "produce an ungrateful and discontented feeling" (McLean, quoted in Checkland 1971:265). Together with other West Indian planters and their attorneys and managers, MacLean resisted the British government's attempt to enforce a stronger amelioration policy that was mandated by the consolidated Order-in-Council of November 2, 1831.

One thing that John MacLean had in common with Frederick Cort was his lack of remorse when slaves who died had been unable to perform plantation labor. MacLean wrote to John Gladstone on October 21, 1828, "The Negroes are generally in good health but we have lost two this Month who however were completely worn out with age and incurable disease and cannot be considered a loss to the estate."²¹

Another letter from John MacLean to Robertson Gladstone said that

the Slaves on Vreeden Hoop have unfortunately decreased for the last nine months, but the diminution is only Numerical – not one prime or healthy Negro has been lost and the efficient Strength of the Gang has not been in the least affected. If the present appearance of the people continues to a favourable result, it is more than probably that the Gang will increase.²²

When it came to saving working slaves whose lives were threatened with epidemic disease, MacLean was eager to take advantage of preventive medicine. He wrote to Robertson Gladstone at Glasgow, Scotland, on June 16, 1831:

I am glad to find that you intend sending out a supply of Vaccine Matter regularly – it may be the means of saving many lives – It appears by Letters

21. FRO, letter from John MacLean to John Gladstone, dated Plantation Vreedenhoop, Demerara, October 21, 1828, Glynne-Gladstone MSS, CH551.

22. FRO, letter from John MacLean to Robertson Gladstone, March 25, 1829, Glynne-Gladstone MSS, CH20.

received in the colony that the Small Pox was raging in Glasgow in the beginning of May – the Vessels from the Clyde [River] may bring it here.²³

OPPOSITION TO COLONIAL SLAVERY: 1823-33

The issue of slave mortality rates and health on the plantations in Demerara proved to be only one of many concerns that faced plantation owners in the region. Gladstone's great possessions of ships, slaves, and plantations made him vulnerable to criticism, especially by men in high political office and other leadership posts. The decade from 1823 to 1833 was fraught with struggle and conflict in Demerara. Planters were confronted with competition from growers of tropical and semi-tropical staples in Brazil, Cuba, and the American South. As chronic debtors, they struggled to meet the demands of creditors in the colony and in Britain, who were chiefly merchants and shipowners. Opposition to the colonial slave system came from humanitarians and abolitionists in Britain and missionaries in the colony. Slave unrest and rebellion were said to be heightened by the missionaries who preached sermons that criticized the planters and their agents for their harsh treatment, and gave assurance of freedom from bondage. Westminster Parliamentarians from constituencies with large numbers of nonconformist and abolitionist voters were prone to support measures for the amelioration and abolition of slavery. Rather than the destruction of property and race war, men of probity who were concerned with the welfare of the slaves as well as the pecuniary interest of the slave owners sought peaceful change in the transition from slavery to freedom (Mathieson 1926:226-31; Williams 1970).

LORD HOWICK: MALTREATMENT ON PLANTATIONS AND A PLEA FOR ABOLITION

One of the most ardent abolitionist leaders was Henry George Grey, Lord Howick, the twenty-nine-year-old son of Lord Grey, the Prime Minister. Lord Howick was both a Member of Parliament and Under Secretary for the Colonies. He wrote in December 1832 that the great problem to be solved was to draw up a plan for the emancipation of the slaves which would "induce them when relieved from the fear of the driver and his whip, to undergo the regular and continuous labour which is indispensable in carrying on the production of sugar."²⁴

23. FRO, letter from John MacLean to Robertson Gladstone at Glasgow, Scotland, dated Demerara, June 16, 1831, Glynne-Gladstone MSS, CH20.

24. *Parliamentary Debates*, Hansard, Third Series, Vol. XVIII, London, 1833:1231, 1238-39 (hereafter *Parliamentary Debates*).

On May 14, 1833, Lord Howick made a two-hour speech in the House of Commons in which he attacked a plan by another member for the emancipation of the slaves in the West Indies and Guiana and solicited support for his own plan. In broad outline, his plan was to set the slaves free and lend the sum of £15,000,000 as compensation to the slave owners.²⁵

Lord Howick devoted a large part of his speech to the colony of Demerara and its slaves, slave-owners, managers, and absentee proprietors. From the records of the Protector of the Slaves he discovered that there had been an "extraordinary increase both in the number and in the severity of punishments, and that three-fourths of these punishments had been inflicted in consequence of difficulties with respect to the performance of work, that is, for 'bad work.'" The Protector also stated that "while the amount of punishment is thus increasing, the effect produced is daily diminishing, and there is a growing difficulty in compelling the negroes to work." Furthermore, he asserted that "in no colony is the mortality among the slave population so great as in Demerara."²⁶

At a later point in his address, Lord Howick proceeded to show how the decrease in the slave population in Demerara was caused by the over-exaction of labor from the slaves. He investigated the statistics of the estates that were entirely or partially cultivated in sugar. He found that in the year 1829 there were 47,456 slaves on these estates and that in this number the excess of males was 2,344, or rather less than 5 percent. "Among these slaves," he said, "in three years to May 1832, there were 2,828 births, or five and six-tenths per cent. The deaths were 5,573, or eleven and one-tenth per cent, making a decrease in the time I have mentioned of 2,745, or five and five-tenths per cent."²⁷

Lord Howick turned next to the records of twenty-six sugar estates where there had been "a loss varying from one or two in the whole number to no less than a seventh of the population." He said that on Vreedenhoop, "the estate belonging to Mr. Gladstone," in the two years from the close of 1829 to the close of 1831, there had been a loss of forty-six slaves. "The average number of slaves was 516, the average sugar production was 1,009,916 lbs., or for each negro 1,955 lbs; and the decrease of population in two years was forty-six, or nearly four and a-half per cent per annum." Lord Howick said that in the years 1829, 1830, and 1831, a large crop had been produced, to the great advantage of the owner of Vreedenhoop, "but, unhappily, at the price of a dreadful loss of life amongst the slaves."²⁸

25. *Parliamentary Debates* 1833:1249.

26. *Parliamentary Debates* 1833:1250-51.

27. *Parliamentary Debates* 1833:151-54.

28. *Parliamentary Debates* 1833:1249.

According to Rivière, Lord Howick charged MacLean with systematically working the slaves to death in the interest of a high sugar output. Lord Howick attributed the heavy loss of life on sugar plantations, especially in Demerara, to the large number of absentee proprietors whose plantations were managed by persons who had no permanent interest in them. He did not believe that overseers and attorneys were by nature more cruel or less averse to inflicting unnecessary pain on their fellow-creatures than other men. The root of the problem was the great competition among these overseers and attorneys for employment.

They found by experience that the owners at a distance are better acquainted with the result of their management, as to the profit produced, than as to the comfort and welfare of the negroes; and the consequence is, that among persons in this situation in life, the object of emulation is, who shall produce the largest crops at the smallest expense (Rivière 1968:290).

As expected, John Gladstone and his four sons were outraged by the charges levied against them by Lord Howick. Two of these sons, Thomas and William Ewart, sat with their father in the House of Commons. William made his maiden speech in defense of his father. He claimed that the state of things at Vreedenhoop estate was no worse than on other properties. The numerous slave deaths were owing to the large importation of Africans into Demerara immediately previous to the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. Moreover, when the estate of Vreedenhoop came into his father's possession in the mid-1820s, out of 550 slaves, no less than 140 were aged and infirm persons. The future prime minister confessed with shame and pain that cases of cruelty had existed, and he declared that the British legislature and public should extinguish slavery in the colonies.

He admitted, too, that we had not fulfilled our Christian obligations by communicating the inestimable benefits of our religion to the slaves in our colonies, and that the belief among the early English planters, that if you made a man a Christian you could not keep him a slave, had led them to the monstrous conclusion that they ought not to impart Christianity to their slaves.²⁹

Another critic of the absentee proprietors and their colonial agents was Sir Benjamin D'Urban, Lieutenant Governor of Essequibo and Demerara, who took up his office in 1824. He wrote to Earl Bathurst, Secretary of State for the Colonies, on September 30, 1824, a year after the slave rebellion had been quelled. D'Urban believed that the slaves no longer expected their freedom, but were sullen, discontented, and impatient of their condition. Much of this attitude was kept alive and in irritation "by the injudicious managers under whom too many of the slaves are placed; half educated men of little discre-

29. John Henry Barrow (ed.), *The Mirror of Parliament*, Vol. II, June 3, 1833, p. 2079.

tion, or command over their own caprices; good planters perhaps – but quite unfit to have the charge of bodies of men, although they might take very proper care of cattle” (D’Urban, quoted in Williams 1952:188-89). At times these men were frightened at the recollection of the recent slave rebellion, and at other times they were unreasonably violent and harsh. D’Urban thought that the greatest evil he had to contend with was “the general absence of proprietors, rendered still more pernicious by the careless or injudicious selection which they make of their managers” (quoted in Williams 1952:188-89).

Douglas Hall, an economic historian of the Caribbean region, published an article on absentee-proprietorship in 1964. He wrote that there is hardly a commentator or a historian of the British West Indies who did not point to absentee-proprietorship as a major source of the distresses of these colonies in the nineteenth century or earlier. These commentators and historians maintained that, as a result of absentee-proprietorship, the colonies were drained of economic wealth, denied a gentry who might have set a high example in social and political life, that many plantations were left to the management of men who were to a large extent incompetent and often dishonest, and that many of the absentee-proprietors in Britain squandered their fortunes in vulgar display.

THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ABSENTEE PROPRIETOR

The general living conditions and social fabric of British Guiana were addressed by the resident physician and surgeon, Henry G. Dalton. Dalton was a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons, London; Corresponding Member of the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia; and a member of other professional societies. He was also the author of the two-volume *History of British Guiana*, which includes a general description of the colony, a narrative of some of the principal events in the colony’s history, and an account of the climate, geology, staple products, and natural history.

Dalton wrote not only of the slaves who performed the arduous labor on the plantations, but also of the overseers, managers, and attorneys who directed their labor on the estates of resident and absentee proprietors. He said that a large proportion of the immigrants from Europe in British Guiana were born and raised in Scotland. For the most part, they were “of humble extraction, uneducated, and glad to accept of any opening that presented itself; they exemplified the well-known caution and parsimony of their race, and, from the humblest, gradually rose to fill some of the highest situations” (Dalton 1855:306-7). While they were more successful in business than the immigrants from England and Ireland, they also encountered greater reverses.

While luxury and comfort were commonly enjoyed by the owner or agent of a large estate in Guiana, the young man who was still on the first step of the lad-

der of plantation management was said to have had a weary and troublesome ascent before him. Having left a home of civilization in Europe, he commenced life in Guiana as an overseer, which Dalton (1855:330) described as "a kind of superintendent of the allotted work of the slaves." He arose at dawn on week-days and followed his gang of laborers to their place of toil on the plantation. "[E]xposed to the burning sun or temptuous rain, he remained for hours in the open air, encouraging the active, stimulating the lazy, and subduing the refractory. His arm of power was the whip, either plied by himself or by a headman" (Dalton 1855:330).

At the end of the day the young man was worn out with fatigue. Returning at a late hour to "recruit exhausted nature," he threw himself into his hammock or cot. "It was no wonder," remarked Dalton (1855:330), "that the monotony of the day's occupation was too often varied by the excitement of the night's carousal, which often renewed, laid the seeds of future disease, or hurried him to an untimely grave."

Owing to the unsettled conditions in Guiana, few women from Europe ventured into the colony, and those who did come were not persons whose education or moral habits had a beneficial influence on the menfolk. Unrestrained by the presence of refined and virtuous women, having no scandal or public opinion to encounter, and being wholly liberated from all religious and social obligations, the colonials

formed intimate relations with the humblest of their slaves, beginning, perhaps, with some vague sense of personal responsibility, but gradually breaking down all the barriers of honor or decency, until the whole country presented a scene of demoralisation that would scarcely be credited in the present age (Dalton 1855:173-74).

Dalton said that the mother and her mulatto offspring were frequently made free by purchase, and the children brought up to some trade or business. In other cases, the children "were still accounted slaves, and were often compelled to labour in the field, without being allowed to derive any advantage from their European descent" (Dalton 1855:174).

Added to the profligate habits of the colonials was their excessive consumption of alcohol. This form of dissipation was not regarded as a vice or as prejudicial to health among the overseers, but rather as a proof of thorough colonization (Dalton 1855).

BIRTH AND DEATH RATES OF GLADSTONE'S SLAVE LABOR FORCE

Dalton's account of the dissipative habits of the colonials shed some light on the difficulties encountered by the slaves in the region. Another source of information was provided by James Robertson, the Registrar of Slaves for the Colony

of Demerara-Essequibo from 1817 to 1834. He carefully tabulated and analyzed the data on the slave population in published reports that are valuable for modern historians and demographers. However, the categories and the intervals employed in these reports are somewhat erratic (Higman 1984:9-10). In his article, "A Life Table for a West Indian Slave Population," published in 1952, George W. Roberts has used Robertson's tabulations to construct a life table for Demerara for the period 1820-32. Roberts concludes in his article that

extremely high mortality was experienced by the slave population. The average length of life is under 23 years, and one-half of the original cohort are dead by age 15. Mortality over age 30 is particularly severe. This heavy mortality, it should be emphasized, was not the result of any unusual epidemic but was fully representative of slave conditions. Moreover, the years 1820-32 covered probably the healthiest period of the slave regime, as ameliorating laws were passed in 1825. (Roberts 1952:243)

Gladstone's labor force comprised men, women, children, and invalids. At Vreedenhoop estate there were a total of 562 slaves in November 1828 consisting of 217 men, 189 women, 66 boys, and 90 girls. There was a decline of ninety slaves on this estate from November 1828 to June 1832, a period of three-and-a-half years. For the period of enumeration for purposes of compensation, the slaves on Vreedenhoop estate declined from 472 to 416, a total of 56, from May 31, 1832 to August 1, 1834. Slave deaths rose irregularly to a high point of twenty-three in the age range of thirty-one to forty, which, together with higher age ranges, were made up largely of slaves who were born in Africa. Though the mortality was heavy, the fact that the deaths were spaced rather evenly suggests that there were no unusual epidemics. Moreover, it can be shown that male slaves on Vreedenhoop estate suffered a higher mortality rate than that of females.

During the weeks following enactment of the Emancipation Bill to abolish slavery in the British colonies on August 1, 1834, the planters or their attorneys submitted a "Claim to be Awarded for Slaves" on each property to the Registrar of Slaves for the District of Demerara and Essequibo, British Guiana. The compensation claims for John Gladstone's four estates included 139 children under six years of age who were freed and 47 invalids (Checkland 1971:320, see also 414-15). The claims for the slaves amounted to £22,440.19.7 for Vreedenhoop; £22,271.15.5 for Success; £14,719.9.9 for Wales; and £10,276.18.7 for Vreedestein: total £ 69,709.3.6. Data from the four claims, together with calculations based upon the claims, are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Decrease of Slaves on the Sugar Estates of Gladstone in Demerara, 1832-34³⁰

Name of Estate	Number of Slaves May 31, 1832	Increase by Birth	Decrease by Death	Net Decrease	Percentage Decrease	Number of Slaves Aug 1, 1834
Vreedenhoop	472	20	76	56	11.9	416
Success	444	25	40	15	3.4	429
Wales	289	6	23	17	5.9	272
Vreedestein	209	7	23	16	7.7	193
Totals	1,414	58	162	104	7.4	1,310

Gladstone was compensated by Act of Parliament in 1837 in the amount of £84,718 for 1,590 slaves in the colony of Demerara, and to the amount of £8,808 for 449 slaves in Jamaica. The total number emancipated was 2,039, and the compensation £93,526. In addition, some 190 children under six years of age were set free. Gladstone's total West Indian property in 1833 amounted to approximately £336,000, which was one-half of his total wealth (Checkland 1971).

The data collected and compiled by Registrar Robertson supply aggregate data for the slave population of Demerara-Essequibo at intervals of three years from 1817 to 1832. Deaths exceeded births on a colony-wide basis throughout this time period, ranging from 1,017 in 1829 to 3,140 in 1826. When the total population of 65,517 for May 31, 1832 is divided into 2,930, which was the excess of deaths over births, the percentage of deaths per annum is 4.3. Comparing this percentage with that of the Gladstone plantations, as shown in Table 1, we see that on an annual basis, or one-half of the percentage decreases shown in the table, the estates of Success, Wales, and Vreedestein were below the colony level, whereas that of Vreedenhoop was somewhat higher, about 6.0.

SUGAR PRODUCTION AFTER SLAVERY: THE EXPERIMENT WITH INDENTURED LABORERS FROM INDIA

The end of slavery in Demerara did not bring an end to the Gladstone family's participation in the plantation economy and society of the colony. John Gladstone and his partners and son decided to conform to the new laws and continue the production of sugar with the same labor force whose legal status was changed from slave to apprentice for a period of four years. The apprentices were to be released from the disabilities formerly imposed upon

30. FRO, "Claims for the Compensation to be awarded to Sir John Gladstone for his Slaves who were to be Emancipated. Papers relating to the estates and business interests of Sir John Gladstone," Glynne Gladstone MSS.

them as slaves. They were to work for their former owners three-fourths of the day in return for food, clothing, and lodging. The remaining hours were at their own disposal, including work on the plantations at a fixed rate of wages (Mathieson 1967:233-35). Special provision was made for the apprentices to purchase their freedom. Special Magistrates were appointed in Great Britain to go to the colonies to administer the laws governing the treatment of the apprentices under the practical working of the new system (Augier *et al.* 1960:174-78).

John Gladstone embarked on a scheme to recruit and transport Indian laborers from Bengal to work on his and other plantations in Demerara. He learned from his attorney in Demerara that the liberated slaves were not easy to handle, and he feared that they would refuse to work on the estates when their apprenticeship ended. On the other hand, the reputed cheapness and tractability of Bengali laborers was an incentive to go forward with the scheme. After lobbying the government to approve his plan, Gladstone formed a partnership with John Moss, his friend and fellow absentee planter, and they hired Messrs. Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co., to transport the Indians from Calcutta to Georgetown, Demerara (Checkland 1971).

Isaac Dookhan, who was descended from a family of Indians who came to Demerara, became a leading historian of the Caribbean region. In his article, "The Gladstone Experiment," he says that on May 31, 1843, after the end of the indenture period, 414 Indians had been embarked at Calcutta on ships commissioned by the firm of Gladstone and Moss, of whom eighteen had died, leaving 396. Another report of 1839, which was drawn up in British Guiana, shows that six plantations were supplied with 412 British Indians, consisting of 380 men, 14 women, and 18 children. Gladstone's Vreedenhoop plantation was supplied with 64 men, 3 women, and 3 children, total 70; and Vreedestein with 31 men and no women and children. Dookhan (1976-77:634-35) writes that

while workers were free from the restraints of slavery, the employers found it difficult to develop more humane means of treatment compatible with that freedom. Rather, they continued to apply or sanction the means of coercion common to slavery, and in this regard the Indians fared no better than the ex-slaves.

Their maltreatment was brought to public attention through the medium of the anti-slavery newspaper, the *British Emancipator*, which reported on January 9, 1839, "several attempts by gangs of Indians to run away from Bellevue and Vreed-en-hoop, as a result of ill treatment" (Dookhan 1976-77:635).

By February of 1840, John Gladstone was debating whether or not to continue his investment in Demerara. The British Indian workers on Vreedenhoop suffered greatly from disease and twelve had died. After he discovered

a loss on current account of £5,000 on Vreedenhoop, he sold the estate for £53,000. Success estate was also disposed of. By 1849 Gladstone's only financial interest in Demerara was a mortgage of £18,000 on Wales estate. Though the Gladstone experiment in British Guiana with British Indian laborers was largely a failure, the continuous exodus of ex-slaves from the plantations after the termination of their apprenticeship on August 1, 1838, led to the revival of Indian immigration to the Caribbean (Dookhan 1976-77; Checkland 1954, 1971).

RECAPITULATION

Gladstone's experience as a plantation owner in Guiana reflects much of the history of the region prior to and following the Emancipation Bill of 1834. Together with Essequibo and Berbice, the colony of Demerara became British Guiana in 1831. It was the only British colony on the continent of South America. The colony was part of a region that had a strange physical environment. It was a land of heavy rainfall and numerous great rivers. The coastal lands which consisted mainly of fertile clays was originally a swamp which was reclaimed under the direction of the Dutch at great cost with the labor of African slaves and their descendants and converted to irrigated sugar cane and rice lands. This cultivated land lay mostly below sea level and needed the protection of a sea wall, and also a back dam to prevent flooding with fresh water from the mighty rivers of the Amazon, Negro, and Orinoco basins. In 1746 the Dutch governor of Demerara, Essequibo, and Berbice threw open the region to settlement. Included among the settlers were planters from the neighboring British Caribbean islands who later became more numerous than the Dutch. These colonies were captured and re-captured during the American Revolution and Napoleonic Wars until in 1814 they were ceded to Great Britain.

Absent from this article has been a discussion of the impact of racism and the desire for profits upon people from Africa and their descendants in Demerara. Racism can be defined as a mechanism of control of oppressed groups that justifies the low reward for productive labor. Anya Jabour has supplied evidence from Trinidad, Berbice, and Demerara-Essequibo during the period of amelioration that racism and the desire for profits were a deadly mix for Caribbean and Guianese slaves (Sheridan 1985). She writes that

a new and hostile disease environment, coupled with extreme work loads and inadequate diet, put enslaved Africans and their descendants in the New World in a precarious position. The situation was compounded by miserliness and racism, which induced slaveowners, doctors, and even

slaves' advocates to overlook evidence of slave malnutrition and illness. Slaves were punished for complaining of poor health, exhibiting signs of illness and malnutrition, and for attempting to augment the scanty official care given them. As a result, proposed measures for improving slave health and achieving natural increase were ineffective. Racism and profit-seeking were key elements in the demographic debacle of Caribbean slavery. (Jabour 1994:17)

John Gladstone was a traveling merchant, shipowner, shipper, trader, and Liverpool merchant prince and Member of Parliament prior to 1816, when he became the full owner of a slave-sugar plantation in Demerara. While he had experience as a supplier of plantation inputs and the marketing of tropical commodities, Gladstone lacked experience with the ownership and management of chattel slaves in the sugar colonies. We have seen that, in a letter from an official of the London Missionary Society, of January 11, 1824, John Gladstone was informed that events in Demerara had shown how little a non-resident proprietor could control the actions of his agents in the colony. This communication, together with information critical of Gladstone's plantation attorney in Demerara, should have been received as a warning to take prompt corrective action, but Gladstone delayed more than four years before sending his son Robertson to inspect his properties, dismiss his attorney, and replace him with the manager of one of his estates.

The condition of the slaves on the Gladstone sugar plantations in Demerara in the period of this study was such that the deaths exceeded the births as a result of hard labor, severe punishment, a hostile disease environment, imbalance of the sexes, an ageing population, sexual exploitation, racism, and the desire for profits. The older generation of bondsmen and bondswomen were born in West Africa and had survived numerous hazards to their lives, including capture, the voyage to the colony, seasoning, and life as an agricultural laborer. Others who were born in the colony were vulnerable to the hazards of childbirth and care by mothers who were part-time field hands. Both groups were vulnerable to exposure to the elements, disease, poor nutrition, and forced labor. Contributing to the life of unceasing toil and deprivation was the system of management whereby numbers of West Indian proprietors became absentees, leaving their slave plantations under the care of agents who were more concerned with the production of large crops of sugar than the health and welfare of the slaves.

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