

## Reforming everywhere and all at once: transitioning to free labor across the British empire, 1837-1838

Article (Accepted Version)

Boehme, Kate, Mitchell, Peter and Lester, Alan (2018) Reforming everywhere and all at once: transitioning to free labor across the British empire, 1837-1838. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 60 (3). pp. 688-718. ISSN 0010-4175

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/68393/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

## **Reforming Everywhere and All at Once: Transitioning to Free Labor Across the British Empire, 1837-1838**

**Kate Boehme, Peter Mitchell and Alan Lester**

### **Abstract**

In late 1837 and early 1838 the British imperial government was preparing for an empire-wide transition from bonded to nominally free labor. This article builds upon recent scholarship that promotes a holistic, global approach to this transition, by narrowing the temporal frame and expanding the spatial. We emphasise interconnectivity and simultaneity rather than chronological succession, and we analyse the governance, rather than the experience, of this transition. Our approach is founded upon analysis of correspondence passing from every British colonial site through the Colonial Office in 1837-8. We suggest that this hub of imperial government sought to reconcile the persistence of different conditions in each colony with the pursuit of three overarching policy objectives: redistributing labor globally; distinguishing between the moral debts owed to different kinds of bonded labor, and managing trade-offs between security, economy and morality. We conclude that the governance of the transition to free labor is best conceived as an assemblage of material and expressive elements of different spatial scales, whose interactions were complex and indeterminate. Through these specific governmental priorities and a particular communications infrastructure, these elements were brought into critical alignment at this moment to shape a significant transition in relations between people across the world.

**Keywords:** British Empire; Labor; Reform; Snapshots

## Introduction

In the 1830s, the British imperial government oversaw a ‘mighty experiment’: a broad transition from unfree to nominally free labor regimes across a globally extensive empire.<sup>1</sup> We have yet to comprehend how haphazard or orderly was the coordination of this signal moment. This article attempts to pin down this transformative governmental project. It also seeks to make a much broader contribution: to develop a critical appreciation of the limits and geographies of imperial governmentality.

What historians often speak of as ‘the’ imperial government was an amalgam of geographically disparate governmental entities. In the 1830s, these entities were brought into alignment with a body of officials in London by a maritime communications network which was integral to the functioning of the empire as a whole. Officials in London sought to coordinate and direct across the assemblage, but they were not the only, nor necessarily the most significant, component of ‘imperial government.’ There was no discrete ‘centre of calculation’ at the heart of empire, but rather a number of offices including not only the dilapidated Downing Street premises of the Colonial Office, but also the much grander East India Company headquarters at Leadenhall Street, and the Board of Control’s office in Whitehall.<sup>2</sup> These offices, most

---

<sup>1</sup> S. Drescher. *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor Versus Slavery in British Emancipation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> B. Latour. *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); See P. Burroughs. ‘Imperial Institutions and the Government of Empire,’ in A. Porter (ed), *The Oxford History of the British Empire:*

directly concerned with the governance of colonial possessions, were nested within a more complex set of relations between government offices, Parliament and the Cabinet. The Colonial Office (technically the War and Colonial Office until 1854) administered territories held formally by the Crown while the Foreign Office liaised with other European governments and their respective colonial territories. Within the Indian Ocean region, including points of maritime transport connection across the Middle East (but excluding Ceylon), territories claimed by Britain were administered by the East India Company's office, with governmental oversight from the Board of Control. These divisions between spheres of empire and imperial offices were not absolute: the men who sought to govern the empire exchanged ideas, shared cultures and spaces, and travelled between colonies and territories of different kinds.<sup>3</sup> Above all, vast quantities of paper circulated within and between the respective London offices.<sup>4</sup> 'Imperial government' consisted of a London-centred micro-network of inter-departmental relations, all nested within a global network of metropolitan-colonial and colonial-colonial governmental relations.

---

*The Nineteenth Century*, (Oxford University Press, 1999): pp. 170-97; J. Cell. *British Colonial Administration in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, (Yale University Press, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> David Lambert and Alan Lester (eds), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> J. Dittmer. 'Theorizing a More-than-Human Diplomacy: Assembling the British Foreign Office, 1839-1874,' *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2015: pp. 78–104.

In 1837-8 the most significant issue preoccupying this imperial governmental assemblage was a far-reaching labor transition from slavery to other forms of free or coerced labor.<sup>5</sup> This transition was part of a broader redefinition of the terms of labor employment that had been emergent for decades.<sup>6</sup> Changing attitudes to slavery and the value of ‘free labour’ in Britain and elsewhere in the empire, dating from the 1770s, were integral to it.<sup>7</sup> Once the emancipation of the enslaved was heralded by the British abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807, colonists had attempted to use indentured Asian laborers in Trinidad, St. Helena, Ceylon, and, above all, Mauritius.<sup>8</sup> As Richard Allen’s work on the global origins of the indentured labor system demonstrates, Mauritian planters knew of French interest in securing such labor as early as 1818-19, and metropolitan and colonial interest in securing indentured labor long predated the larger scale introduction of indentured workers to Mauritius on five year contracts from

---

<sup>5</sup> At this time it was primarily the rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada which vied with this transition for most attention at the Colonial Office.

<sup>6</sup> D. Hay and P. Craven, *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> See C. L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Robert J. Steinfield, *Coercion, Contract, and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> I.M. Cumpston, *Indians Overseas in British Territories 1834-1854* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953); H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920* (Hertford: Hansib, 1993); D. Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); M. Kale *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor Migration in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

1830.<sup>9</sup> In 1837 accounts of disease, death and overcrowding were brought to the attention of the Indian government, and the Legislative Council appointed a police superintendent to check the engagements of the labourers and conditions on board their ships. In the same year, John Gladstone and three other planters organised for Indian indentured laborers' migration to British Guiana. Faced with evidence of entrapment through fraud, violence and degrading conditions, the Government of India then banned all Indian indentured labour to the colonies. It would not be until 1842 that indentured labor immigration to Mauritius was permitted again, now regulated by a Protector of Immigrants.<sup>10</sup>

Two tendencies have characterized historians' recent approaches to this period of transition. The first is to focus on mobility, working across the regions involved in concurrent developments, transcending the boundaries of nation-focused enquiry in order to develop more networked analyses. We draw on much of this literature in what follows. The second is to try to understand changes in labor conditions from the 'subaltern' perspectives of laborers themselves.<sup>11</sup> The effects of these perspectival shifts have been to show first, that transition to free labor was more comprehensive geographically, and secondly, that it was more limited in terms of the freedoms won, than had generally been assumed.

---

<sup>9</sup> R.B. Allen. 'Slaves, Convicts, Abolitionism and the Global Origins of the Post-Emancipation Indentured Labor System,' *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (2014): p. 328-48; and *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500–1850*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Cumpston, *Indians Overseas*; Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview see Allen, 'Slaves, Convicts, Abolitionism', p. 328.

Various forms of coercion persisted, and were invented anew, long after emancipation. Free and unfree labor existed as ‘part of a continuum’, rather than as discrete categories. Even for Britain itself, ‘we have to give up the idea that so-called free and coerced labour inhabited completely separate universes and try to understand both in terms of a common framework’.<sup>12</sup> ‘Free’ labour, especially in agricultural regions, was still subjected to criminal punishment and incarceration rather than just the withholding of wages when employers found workers deficient. Yet more stark were the conditions in which nominally free apprentices and liberated Africans, as well as indentured labourers, were contracted throughout the empire, both before and after 1838.<sup>13</sup>

Given all of this, the date of freedom promised to those enslaved within the British Empire through the Emancipation Act of 1833 - 1<sup>st</sup> August 1838 - was more nominal than real for many coerced workers. And yet, it was still anticipated, feared or celebrated as a profoundly disruptive and significant moment by those charged with governing the diverse territories involved - those upon whom this article concentrates. It also opened up new opportunities for some laborers to challenge former constraints. Indeed, a further effect of the ‘subaltern’-oriented scholarship has been to recover the ways in which laborers themselves exercised agency in the transition between forms of labor, seeking to exploit the interstices opened up by

---

<sup>12</sup> D. Eltis. ‘Labor and Coercion in the English Atlantic World from the Seventeenth to the Early Twentieth Century,’ in M. Twaddle (ed), *The Wages of Slavery: From Chattel Slavery to Wage Labor in Africa, the Caribbean and England*, (London: Frank Cass, 1993): p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*.

the shifting structures of control and regulation upon which this article places its own emphasis.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of the recent and diverse literature on the labor transition, we are now better informed about the ways that thinking from various colonial contexts informed the demographic ideas of Malthus and his interlocutors in Britain and continental Europe and the ways these ideas intersected with labor relations;<sup>15</sup> about the relationship between newly freed apprentices, Africans liberated by the Royal Navy, and indentured Indian laborers in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans;<sup>16</sup> and about the intersections between forms of slavery,

---

<sup>14</sup> See for example S. Boa. 'Experiences of Women Estate Workers During the Apprenticeship Period in St Vincent, 1834-1838: The Transition from Slavery to Freedom,' *Women's History Review*, Vol. 10, No. 3, (2001) pp. 381-408; D. Paton. *No Bond but the Law: Punishment, Race and Gender in Jamaican State Formation, 1780-1880*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); G. Heuman and D.V. Trotman (eds). *Contesting Freedom: Control and Resistance in the Post-emancipation Caribbean*, (Oxford: Macmillan, 2005); C. Anderson. 'Global Mobilities,' in A. Burton and T. Ballantyne (eds), *World Histories from Below: Disruption and Dissent, 1750 to the Present*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2016): pp. 169-96.

<sup>15</sup> A. Bashford and J. E. Chaplin. *The New Worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus: Rereading the "Principle of Population,"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); R. J. Mayhew (ed). *New Perspectives on Malthus*, (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> N. Worden. 'Diverging Histories: Slavery and its Aftermath in the Cape Colony and Mauritius,' *South African Historical Journal*, Vol. 27, Nol. 1, (1992): pp. 3-25; M.A. Klein. 'Slavery, the International Labor Market and the Emancipation of Slaves in the Nineteenth Century,' *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 15, No. 2, (1994): p. 213; R.M. Adderley. "'A Most



indenture, apprenticeship and convictism across the Indian Ocean and the settler colonies.<sup>17</sup> Despite recent studies situating this ‘great experiment’ more globally and exploring both the continuities and discontinuities in the experiences of the multiple groups subjected to it, we do not yet have a coherent sense of the governmental imperatives that shaped it. The innovation of this article, a restricted temporal frame of late 1837 and 1838, enables us to glimpse this transition in ‘real time’ and in multiple places at once.

The imperial government had been bequeathed an imperative to initiate the labor transition by the antislavery campaign of the previous decades. The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 had

---

Useful and Valuable people?” Cultural, Moral and Practical Dilemmas in the Use of Liberated African Labor in the Nineteenth-Century Caribbean,’ *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 20, No. 1, (1999): pp. 59-80; M. Carter, *Women and Indenture Experiences of Indian Labor Migrants*, (Pink Pigeon Press, 2012); D. Domingues da Silva, D. Eltis, P. Misevich and O. Ojo. ‘The Diaspora of Africans Liberated from Slave Ships in the Nineteenth Century,’ *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 55, No. 3, (2014): pp. 347-69; M. Ryan. “‘A Moral Millstone?’: British Humanitarian Governance and the Policy of Liberated African Apprenticeship, 1808–1848,’ *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 37, No. 2, (2016).

<sup>17</sup> C. Anderson. ‘Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labor in the Nineteenth Century,’ *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 30, No. 1, (2009): pp. 93-109; R.B. Allen. ‘Satisfying the “Want for Laboring People”: European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500–1850,’ *Journal of World History*, Vol. 21, No. 1, (2010): pp. 45-73; N. Worden. ‘Between Slavery and Freedom: the Apprenticeship Period, 1834-1838,’ in N. Worden and C. Crais (eds), *Breaking the Chains: Slavery and its Legacy in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony*, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994): pp. 118-124.

abolished the institution of slavery during the following year throughout the British Empire, with the exceptions of Ceylon and St Helena and the territories governed by the East India Company. In Antigua and Bermuda full emancipation came into immediate effect, but elsewhere those freed from chattel slavery in 1834 were bound to continue working for their former owners as apprentices until August 1838, if they were domestic (non-Praedial) slaves, and August 1840 if they were field laborers (Praedial slaves). During the early months of 1838, Parliament debated how to give effect to the staggered abolition of apprenticeship that had been promised in the 1833 legislation.<sup>18</sup>

While the West India interest sought to prolong apprenticeship for all the previously enslaved beyond the anticipated dates of abolition, Joseph Sturge, a wealthy Quaker and secretary of the Birmingham Anti-Slavery Society, was leading a vocal and increasingly radical campaign for immediate and full emancipation. These months were a period of intense metropolitan scrutiny not just of the Caribbean, but of the Empire's heterogeneous labor relations as a whole. Examining the ways in which the Colonial Office sought to reconcile domestic imperatives with colonial conditions in this frenetic moment enables us to examine in greater detail the various trade-offs which fundamentally shaped the transition from unfree to 'free' labor in multiple colonial locations, and which delimited the freedoms gained for so many laborers.

This temporally-focused, 'snapshot' approach requires the adoption of a wide range of different, 'located' perspectives. We view the British Empire neither from the 'centre' nor from any particular 'periphery' alone, but rather through a gaze which moves back and forth across

---

<sup>18</sup> Hansard, Vol. 42, House of Commons Debate, 'Abolition of Negro Apprenticeship,' (29 March, 1838): pp. 40-108.

multiple sites. While we return most frequently to the Colonial Office in London, as its personnel sought to manage transition, we seek also to understand the imperatives of disparate colonial governments and of the British Parliament, whose debates and resolutions were both informed by, and conditioned, Colonial Office approaches. We conceive of imperial governance as a spatially dispersed assemblage – an entity ‘built by myriad actors with local and diverse connections often solving very local problems,’ which nevertheless adds up to more than the sum of its parts.<sup>19</sup> In practice this means considering emerging transitions involving ‘surplus’ population in the British Isles, convicts in the Australian colonies, apprentices, liberated Africans and convicts in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean colonies, indentured migrants in the Indian, Pacific and Atlantic Ocean colonies and enslaved and indentured laborers in India.

At the Colonial Office, James Stephen had significant personal influence.<sup>20</sup> As Permanent Under-Secretary, every piece of correspondence received by the office was reviewed and commented upon by him. It is usually through his notes on the margins of incoming despatches that we access ‘the Colonial Office’ perspective in the late 1830s. Stephen reported to Under-Secretary of State George Grey. He, in turn, reported to the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, Lord Glenelg, the Whig son of a Clapham Sect member and evangelical anti-slavery reformer. Although Stephen was to a certain extent the architect of emancipation policy, his will alone was never the sole determinant of policy. His Christian evangelical conviction meant, for instance, that he was personally opposed to the employment of Indian indentured labor in

---

<sup>19</sup> J. Darwin. *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain*, (London: Penguin): p. xi.

<sup>20</sup> See P. Knaplund. *James Stephen and the British Colonial System: 1813-1847*, (University of Wisconsin Press, 1953).

the West Indies, on the grounds that it would lead to the ‘introduction of many thousand idolaters.’<sup>21</sup> This view, however, would have to be set aside in the interests of reconciling emancipation with the other imperatives of imperial governance.

This article analyses the correspondence passing through, and in many ways constituting, this imperial governmental assemblage in late 1837 and 1838 up until the moment of emancipation on 1<sup>st</sup> August. We suggest that a set of three major policy imperatives emerged. Each of them was iterated not simply as a result of Parliament’s, or the Secretary of State’s, or Stephen’s political will, but rather through an uneven and irregular global correspondence. Some imperatives were more formally and explicitly stated than others, and some pursued with more determination than others. While we have reviewed correspondence from all colonies, we develop our narrative of these imperatives by drawing on the despatches and returns relating to the colonies most explicitly implicated in each imperative. We have identified these imperatives as: first, redistributing labor on a global scale; secondly, distinguishing between the moral debts owed to different kinds of labor, and thirdly, managing trade-offs between security, economy and morality. We seek to show how each of these imperatives came to be fashioned through a complex exchange between the variously located components of imperial governance. In doing so we hope that a broader reconceptualization of imperial governmentality emerges.

### **Redistributing Labor**

---

<sup>21</sup> Stephen quoted in W.P. Morrell. *British colonial policy in the age of Peel and Russell*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930): p. 529.

The elements comprising the 1837-38 labor transition were diverse. The regions most immediately affected were the Caribbean, the Cape and Mauritius. Under apprenticeship, three quarters of the workers' time was to be spent laboring for former owners in return for food and clothing with the remainder of their time their own: an arrangement described by George Grey as 'an intermediate system of modified coercion.'<sup>22</sup> As we have seen, indentured labor was already beginning to alleviate concerns about ensuing colonial labor shortages in Mauritius in by the early 1830s.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, the East India Company had begun the process of delegating forms of slavery indigenous to South Asia.<sup>24</sup> The transportation of convicts, and the assignment of their labor to meet both governmental and private individuals' labor needs, was simultaneously being re-assessed around many of Britain's imperial possessions, including the settler colonies of Australia.<sup>25</sup>

Behind all of these diverse and yet linked developments was a suite of reforms occasioned by the novel circumstances in which British imperial governmental officials found themselves after the Napoleonic Wars. By 1837, the British Empire consisted of twenty seven colonial

---

<sup>22</sup> Hansard, 'Abolition of Negro Apprenticeship': pp. 40-108.

<sup>23</sup> M. Carter. 'The Transition from Slave to Indentured Labor in Mauritius,' in Twaddle (ed), *The Wages of Slavery*: pp. 114-130.

<sup>24</sup> H. Temperley. 'The Delegalization of Slavery in British India,' in Temperley, *After Slavery*: pp. 169-187; A. Major. "'The Slavery of East and West": Abolitionists and "Unfree" Labor in India, 1820-1833,' in *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4, (2010).

<sup>25</sup> C. Anderson. 'Convicts, Carcerality and Cape Colony Connections in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3, (2016): pp. 429-42.

governments, mostly gubernatorial autocracies, administered by the Colonial Office, plus the protectorates of the Ionian islands, and the extensive territories around South and Southeast Asia administered by the East India Company. Eight of the Colonial Office territories as well as swathes of India had been seized recently by the capitulation of other European powers in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.<sup>26</sup> Parliament had set about devising new modes of governing this expanded empire by despatching commissions to bring back evidence from the Caribbean, Sierra Leone, New South Wales, the Cape, Mauritius, Ceylon, and Malta among other colonies.<sup>27</sup> Many of their reports proposed reforms to labor relations in the light of emancipationist intent. This investigation was taking place in the context not only of evangelical Enlightenment ideas about emancipation, but also of anxieties about the supposed overpopulation of the British Isles and the desire to export labor to the colonies where it was needed most.<sup>28</sup>

Whilst the complex entity that we might describe as the imperial government functioned largely to connect Britain with its colonies, it was also clearly influenced by domestic politics. The

---

<sup>26</sup> *Rules and Regulations of Her Majesty's Colonial Service*, Clowes and Sons for Her Majesty's Stationary Office, (1843): pp. x-xi.

<sup>27</sup> Z. Laidlaw. 'Investigating Empire: Humanitarians, Reform and the Commission of Eastern Inquiry,' *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 40, No. 5, (2012): pp. 749-68; L. Benton and L. Ford. *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800–1850*, (Harvard University Press: 2016).

<sup>28</sup> S. Mintz. 'Models of Emancipation During the Age of Revolution,' *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 17, No. 2, (1996): pp. 1-21; H.J.M. Johnston. *British Emigration Policy, 1815-1830: "Shovelling Out Paupers"*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972).

first policy imperative articulated in the mass of correspondence around labor during 1837-8, was directed at aligning conditions in the British Isles with those across its empire. Schemes in pursuit of optimal demographic distribution originated from various colonies, to be considered by the Colonial and East India Company offices as well as from within the British Isles (including Ireland). Ultimately, the effect was to establish a firm distinction between British emigration to meet labor demands in the settler colonies, and inter-colonial migration as a solution for needs elsewhere. Malthusian ideas clearly helped to shape ideas about British emigration to the settler colonies, but as we will see, they were rendered, during this moment especially, largely irrelevant to understanding indentured Asian emigration to other kinds of colony.

The Reverend Thomas Malthus' ideas of overpopulation have recently been more properly contextualized in relation to colonial expansion overseas.<sup>29</sup> In the lead up to the labor transition, one of Malthus' main correspondents, Robert Wilmot Horton, embodied Colonial Office thinking on the issue.<sup>30</sup> After serving as Under-Secretary of State for War and the Colonies between 1821 and 1828, Wilmot Horton was appointed Governor of Ceylon in 1831. His public reputation had been founded on a published plan for British emigration to Upper Canada.<sup>31</sup> In Britain, he argued, there were innumerable 'poor persons... physically capable of labor,' but

---

<sup>29</sup> Bashford and Chaplin. *The New Worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus*.

<sup>30</sup> Bashford and Chaplin. *The New Worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus*: p. 210.

<sup>31</sup> R. Wilmot Horton. *Outline of a Plan of Emigration to Upper Canada*, (London: 1823); E. Richards. 'Horton, Sir Robert John Wilmot-, third baronet (1784–1841),' in H.C.G. Matthew and B. Harrison (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

with ‘no possessor of property willing to exchange against their labor, wages sufficient to procure them the average means of subsistence.’<sup>32</sup> With ‘extensive colonial possessions’ simultaneously in need of labor, the answer – indeed the obligation of an *imperial* government - seemed obvious. Pauper families should be granted free passage, land grants, tools and provisions. Their costs, Wilmot Horton proposed, should be paid by the parishes through mortgages taken out with the government on the security of the poor rates.

Wilmot Horton’s scheme would provide ‘a safety-valve’ by which excess population could be redistributed across the British Empire, with ‘millions added to those who speak the English language, and carry with them... the sympathies of their native country.’<sup>33</sup> Malthus worried that the character of such people might not be conducive to the building of new societies, but the 1834 Poor Law Act was passed regardless, in line with the recommendations of Wilmot Horton’s 1826-7 select committee, containing a clause encouraging ratepayers to raise funds to help finance the emigration of the local poor.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Bashford and Chaplin. *The New Worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus*: p. 210.

<sup>33</sup> R.N. Ghosh. ‘Malthus on Emigration and Colonization: Letters to Wilmot Horton,’ *Economica*, New Series, Vol. 30, No. 117, (1963): p. 47.

<sup>34</sup> G. Brizan. ‘The Colonial Land and Emigration Commission and immigration to Jamaica, 1840-1860,’ *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 3-4, (1974): p. 39.



By the mid-1830s, when Wilmot Horton was in Ceylon, his ideas for the emigration of ‘paupers’ had been largely superseded.<sup>35</sup> The debate in Britain was moving on to the repeal of the Corn Laws as a solution to high levels of pauperism, Wakefieldian ideas of systematic colonization in South Australia and New Zealand, and an intercolonial emigration scheme designed to redistribute workers from ‘over-populated’ to labor shortage regions.<sup>36</sup> Pursuant to the latter two of these initiatives, Thomas Elliott was appointed the first Agent General for Emigration in London in 1837. The role of Elliott's department was to oversee selection of emigrants for the colonies and to advise the Secretary of State on all emigration matters.<sup>37</sup> Elliott's preparatory work during the months leading up to the 1838 Emancipation informed proposals through which Britain's overpopulation could be brought to bear on colonial shortages, and through which inter-colonial migration could be promoted. Both would be necessary to secure a sustainable relationship between land, capital and labor at an imperial scale.

One of Elliott's first suggestions, in March 1838, bore some of the hallmarks of Wilmot Horton's pauper emigration scheme, but was specifically directed at the Cape Colony. Here, as in the Caribbean and Mauritius, the formerly enslaved were about to join the free labor market, increasing concerns about the availability of low-cost labor.<sup>38</sup> Elliott proposed that a

---

<sup>35</sup> D. Pike. ‘Wilmot-Horton and the National Colonization Society,’ *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, Vol. 7, No. 26, (1956): pp. 205-210; Bashford and Chaplin. *The New Worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus*: pp. 223-225.

<sup>36</sup> Brizan. ‘The Colonial Land and Emigration Commission’: p. 39.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> National Archives, Colonial Office Records (COR). CO 48/197, *Cape Colony: Offices*, No. 362, F. Elliot to J. Stephen, (14 March, 1838).

Commission should be formed in the Cape to conduct a system of emigration for boys between the ages of 10 and 14 to be indentured on colonial farms, and apprenticed until the age of 21 under the guardianship of the Clerks of the Peace.<sup>39</sup> Fifteen to twenty thousand British boys could, in this way, be kept constantly under indenture. However, Stephen's response was less than enthusiastic. He dismissed the idea before it could even be passed on to the new governor of the Cape.<sup>40</sup> As well as being concerned about the distance and contrast between conditions in the Cape and in England, Stephen also alluded to a prior proposal for an inter-colonial flow of labor. He noted that the introduction to the Cape Colony of 'Government Blacks' from Mauritius as laborers had been refused because 'the inhabitants did not feel equal to their remuneration.' Stephen further commented that the same argument, that the wages of such labor was too high, had been applied when refusing the introduction of child apprentices from England.<sup>41</sup>

The movement of laborers from Mauritius to the Cape was not the only abortive scheme for inter-colonial mobility to come before the Colonial Office. In the Caribbean colonies, the overwhelming concern was to find an equally coercible labor force to replace the soon-to-be liberated apprentices. In 1837, Commissioners of Inquiry appointed in Jamaica forwarded the Colonial Office a proposed scheme to direct labor between the Mediterranean and Caribbean islands. Malta, it seemed, could be a possible solution to the impending labor crisis in Jamaica. The proposal suggested that 'Europeans [were] physically unfit for toil beneath a tropical sun'

---

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> COR. CO 48/197, *Cape Colony: Offices*, Comments of J. Stephen on No. 362, F. Elliot to J. Stephen, (14 March, 1838).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

and that only the natives of Malta were fit to fill the void soon to be left by the ‘emancipated negroes, [who] could not be depended on.’<sup>42</sup> The poorer classes of Britain, who had previously been looked upon to fulfil labor demands overseas were not deemed appropriate to replace apprentices in the Caribbean. Though the proposition was merely noted, and not endorsed, by the Colonial Office, as far as the *Jamaica Standard* was concerned, this was ‘the most important, and ... feasible, proposition which we have for some time seen... Emigrants indeed we must have, if we would wish to make anything like crops after 1840; and the sooner we set seriously to work the better.’<sup>43</sup>

Alongside these suggestions concerning the Cape Colony, Malta and Jamaica, all of which were ultimately declined, the Colonial Office was considering two other proposed schemes for an imperial-scale redistribution of labor in late 1837 and early 1838. The exchanges between Stephen and Glenelg on the one hand, and the governors of New South Wales and Ceylon on the other, would consolidate the distinction that was developing between demographic solutions for settler and other colonies.

New South Wales’ Governor, Richard Bourke had come to Australia from the Cape, where he had pre-empted the Colonial Office instruction to liberate the indigenous Khoisan people from

---

<sup>42</sup> COR. CO 158/114, *Malta: Commissioners of Inquiry*, ‘Emigration to Jamaica,’ from *The Jamaican Standard*, (forwarded 16 April, 1837).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*; A similar scheme to import laborers from Malta to Queensland would later eventuate: B. York. ‘Sugar labor: Queensland's Maltese experiment, 1881–84,’ *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 25, (1989): pp. 43-56.

legal bondage to white farmers in 1828.<sup>44</sup> He arrived in Sydney in late 1831, when the population of the colony was around 51,000. By 1838, it was 97,000.<sup>45</sup> The problem that Bourke faced was the same as that which had confronted governors of the Cape Colony since the emigration of British settlers on a large scale in the 1820s; although many free migrants were arriving, business opportunities and the easy availability of land meant that employers still struggled to find sufficient labor.<sup>46</sup>

In March 1837, Glenelg instructed Stephen to send Bourke a proposal arising from Elliott's first report. This time, Elliott argued for 'a more efficient and systematic scheme of emigration to the Australian colonies.'<sup>47</sup> Two thirds of the Crown Land sales fund – money raised by the colonial treasury from the sale of appropriated Aboriginal land to settlers – was to be paid as bounties to emigrants, or recruiters of emigrants, from Britain. Glenelg anticipated that this would help remedy the labor shortages in New South Wales which, as Bourke had earlier reported, were exacerbated by the rapid colonization of the Port Phillip District around

---

<sup>44</sup> Z. Laidlaw. 'Richard Bourke: Irish Liberalism Tempered by Empire,' in D. Lambert and A. Lester (eds), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careerism in the Long Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006): pp. 113-44.

<sup>45</sup> H.M. Stephens. 'Bourke, Sir Richard (1777–1855),' in H.C.G. Matthew and B. Harrison (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/2997>, (accessed April 6, 2016).

<sup>46</sup> On the 1820 settlers in the Cape see A. Lester. *Imperial Networks: creating identities in nineteenth century South Africa and Britain*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>47</sup> COR. CO 201/262, *New South Wales: Despatches*, No. 85, R. Bourke to Glenelg, (1 Feb, 1838).

Melbourne. Bourke was willing to adopt various features of the proposal, but was unhappy about its financial implications.<sup>48</sup> Bourke's most emphatic concerns, however, were expressed in response to the issue of inter-colonial migration: specifically a suggestion that indentured Indian labor be used to supply the deficit in New South Wales. This was not a new suggestion. As Rose Cullen has shown, in 1836 and 1837 the entrepreneurs John Mackay, formerly from India, and J R Mayo from Mauritius, had suggested drawing upon the Mauritian precedent to recruit Indian indentured labor as 'a quick fix' for the labour shortage in New South Wales.<sup>49</sup> Bourke had established a committee to investigate the possibility, but decided to ignore its recommendation that Indians be recruited with certain protections.

'Upon the subject of Indian laborers,' Bourke wrote, 'The attempt would, I fear, prove a sacrifice of permanent advantage to temporary expediency.'<sup>50</sup> In this rejection of Asian indentured labor, the liberal Bourke anticipated the concerns of other governors seeking to build British settler societies. The racial profile of immigrants mattered hugely when a governor's primary task was to construct proto-Britains rather than simply to maintain an inherited colonial economy.<sup>51</sup> Despite some support among labour-hungry pastoralists in New South Wales, Bourke insisted on drawing a distinction between the requirements of the temperate settler colonies for white British labor, and those of other, plantation, colonies for

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, Comments of J. Stephen on No. 83, Bourke to Glenelg, (1 Feb, 1838).

<sup>49</sup> R. Cullen, 'Empire, Indian Indentured Labour and the Colony: The Debate Over 'coolie' Labour in New South Wales, 1836–1838', *History Australia*, 9,1, 2012, pp. 84-109

<sup>50</sup> Comments of J. Stephen on No. 83, Bourke to Glenelg, (1 Feb, 1838).

<sup>51</sup> See Tony Ohlsson, 'The origins of a white Australia: the coolie question 1837-1843', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 92, 2, (2011), pp. 203-219.

Asian migrant labor. It was in these months of 1837-8 that the delineation was being drawn decisively, even as the settler colonies were still being created, and in the midst of an empire-wide re-thinking of labor relations.<sup>52</sup>

By 1837 Wilmot Horton was at the centre of innovation around inter-colonial labor migration as governor of Ceylon. He was now in a position to influence migration flows directly. During the 1820s, the island's governors had been instructed to enact measures for the 'amelioration' of slavery along with those in the West Indies, but in the expectation that the transition would be safely managed to maintain both sugar output and political stability. By the end of that decade, the Ceylon colonial government had already freed female children of 'slave' caste status, and all the enslaved formerly owned by the Dutch East India Company.<sup>53</sup> Unlike Bourke in New South Wales, Wilmot Horton was an enthusiastic proponent of migrant Indian labor. In the lead up to emancipation, he wrote enthusiastically in support of the notion. Under his governorship, even though they continued to exploit enslaved labor, Ceylonese planters tapped into indigenous systems of agricultural bondage in India to recruit labor on a sub-continental scale.<sup>54</sup> In 1838, Wilmot Horton was keen to deploy the East India Company's new steam ships

---

<sup>52</sup> As Cullen points out, Bourke's response was, shortly afterwards, and in the light of the ban on further indentured labour migration, reinterpreted as resistance to a new form of slavery: Cullen, 'Empire, Indian Indentured Labour and the Colony', p. 105.

<sup>53</sup> R.B. Allen. 'Slaves, Convicts, Abolitionism and the Global Origins of the Post-Emancipation Indentured Labor System,' *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (2014): p. 70. For earlier attempts to introduce Chinese labour, see Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean*.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

to carry indentured laborers more regularly and reliably between the regions of supply and demand.<sup>55</sup> As O'Rourke suggests, the East India Company's interest in developing new steam technology would enable greater price integration for Asian labor, and the possibility of indentured labor employment on a larger scale.<sup>56</sup>

In 1837-8, while Bourke petitioned to restrict settler colony immigration to Britons alone, Wilmot Horton was advocating greater inter-colonial flows of Indian labor for the sugar-producing colonies.<sup>57</sup> During the months leading up to emancipation, the governors' correspondence contributed to two emergent policy orientations for dealing with labor distribution and shifting social hierarchies on an imperial scale. First, although a revival of Wilmot Horton-style parish emigration schemes was out of the question, investing in the emigration of more desirable Britons to the settler colonies was worthwhile, so long as it was done in consultation with the governors concerned. Secondly, while certain kinds of inter-colonial labor flows (such as that from Malta to Jamaica) were impractical, indentured Indian migrants would be vital in allowing governors to maintain productivity in the plantation colonies. Together, both orientations would allow the Colonial Office and Board of Control to

---

<sup>55</sup> British Library (BL), India Office Records. IOR B/195, *Court Minutes*, (7 & 13 Feb, 1838).

<sup>56</sup> K.H. O'Rourke. 'The Economist and Global History,' in J. Belich, J. Darwin, M. Frenz and C. Wickham (eds), *The Prospect of Global History*, (Oxford University Press, 2016): p. 51.

<sup>57</sup> Wilmot Horton was also instructed at this time not to send Ceylonese convicts to the Australian colonies: COR. CO 54/156, *Ceylon: Despatches*, Comments of J. Stephen on No. 135, Wilmot-Horton to Glenelg, (28 Sept, 1837); Ibid, Official Reply from Colonial Office to Wilmot-Horton, (21 Feb, 1838).

fulfil the British government's post-emancipation mandate for 'free' labor, but in very different ways.

### **Distinguishing Moral Debts**

As debates over the optimal distribution of labor suggest, the transition of the late 1830s was characterized by myriad local inflections of various types of laborer-employer relations. The categories of convict, indentured, apprenticed and free labor, publicly deployed and privately assigned, mingled in various combinations in many places. However, Colonial Office staff consistently distinguished one particular group of workers from these complex inter-relations. This group had been the focal point for the preceding decades of antislavery campaigning, and it was one to whom the British public and its government acknowledged a moral debt. It was comprised of those men, women and children of African descent who had been held in chattel slavery by British colonists.<sup>58</sup>

The nature of the debt was made clear in the Colonial Office's response to an address honouring the recently-crowned Queen Victoria from the formerly enslaved apprentices of the Bahamas.<sup>59</sup> Glenelg replied assuring them that there 'is no class of persons whose welfare is more dear to Her Majesty... than those who during the reign of her late revered predecessor were raised... from the condition of slaves to free subjects of the British Crown.'<sup>60</sup> With four years of apprenticeship succeeding the Act of Abolition, however, there was unfinished business to be

---

<sup>58</sup> C.L. Brown. *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>59</sup> COR. CO 23/100, *Bahamas: Despatches*, No. 28, Cockburn to Glenelg, (15 Jan 1838).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*



attended. As Sir George Strickland put it in the March 1838 House of Commons debate on the abolition of apprenticeship, although the 1833 Act had ‘declared, in emphatic terms, that slavery should for ever be abolished’ in practice, apprenticeship meant that that declaration ‘has not been carried into effect, but that it has been passed over, slurred, totally neglected.’<sup>61</sup> The sense of obligation to that original intention in 1838 was not empty rhetoric. The responsibilities of Britain as an antislavery nation genuinely shaped national debates and political culture in Britain and its empire during transition and in its aftermath.<sup>62</sup> However, those responsibilities were circumscribed, restricted in respect to other forms of slavery and quite capable of tolerating other forms of ‘legitimate’ coerced labor.

As Howard Temperley explains, ‘slavery in India was a very different proposition from slavery in the New World in that it was an institution the British had inherited... rather than one that they had themselves created.’<sup>63</sup> Indian slavery was thus distinguished from the British-developed institution of the West Indies. Despite a long history of attempts by East India Company officials to intervene against Indian slave trading, especially in children, Indian practices ignited no national guilt, nor inspired any abolitionist movements comparable to the campaign to abolish Atlantic slave systems.<sup>64</sup> In fact, quite the contrary, as Company planters deliberately positioned their products in the marketplace as the product of ‘free’ rather than ‘slave’ labor, overlooking the impact that forms of forced labor had on production in British

---

<sup>61</sup> Hansard, ‘Abolition of Negro Apprenticeship,’ pp. 40-108.

<sup>62</sup> R. Huzzey. *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

<sup>63</sup> Temperley. ‘The Delegalization of Slavery’: p. 169.

<sup>64</sup> See Allen, *European Slave Trading*, pp. 138-144.

India.<sup>65</sup> Much of the correspondence moving through London's imperial bureaucracy in 1837-8 concerned the extent to which such pre-Company practices of slavery should be reformed in line with those in the Caribbean. Governments in India, Ceylon and Sierra Leone were the most prominent interlocutors on this issue.

Even where there was a will to intervene against broadly-defined slavery, reform could take place only after local labor relations had actually been identified as such. The concept of "slavery" was highly specific to time and place, often embracing or overlapping with other forms of forced labor.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, as Wilmot Horton's experience in Ceylon indicated, without the persistence of Indian bonded labor forms beyond the moment of emancipation, it is doubtful whether many British colonies would have been able to secure sufficient indentured workers to develop a new system of malleable labor, demanded as a replacement for freed slaves, and to serve the expanding plantation economies of the Indian Ocean colonies.<sup>67</sup> Although the East India Company began no longer to legally recognize slavery after 1834, '[t]here were probably more slaves in India than in all of the Americas, but they were mostly owned by Indian masters,' and the Company administration 'lacked both the desire and the administrative capacity to force abolition on reluctant Indian ruling classes.'<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> A. Major. *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772-1843*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).

<sup>66</sup> G. Campbell and E.A. Alpers. 'Introduction: Slavery, Forced Labor and Resistance in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia,' *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 25, No. 2, (2004): pp. ix-x.

<sup>67</sup> Allen. 'Slaves, Convicts, Abolitionism'; Anderson. 'Convicts and Coolies.'

<sup>68</sup> The Company was persuaded to take more decisive action against slavery in its territories in 1843, when it declared that courts were no longer to recognize claims arising out of slave

In 1837-8, the Board of Control in London evinced little concern about Indian slavery, and the Colonial Office was unconcerned about Wilmot Horton's plans for the importation of indentured laborers. It was, however, worried about indigenous forms of slavery in Ceylon. Although the colony had been exempted from the 1833 Abolition Act, Wilmot Horton informed Glenelg that '[t]he state of Slavery in the Kandyan Provinces attracted my attention at a very early period of my administration.' The Governor was perturbed by the apparent hostility toward emancipationist policies expressed by the Kandyan Chiefs. His anxiety over the potential for renewed revolt within the kingdom had 'rendered it necessary to defer any measure connected with Slavery' during the early years of his governorship. However, he explained that he had since made a cautious start in attempting to reconcile Kandyan slave-holding with emancipation, having passed a bill intended to develop an accurate slave register in the colony.<sup>69</sup>

Despite such official moves toward abolition, Wilmot-Horton was hardly an ardent opponent of Kandyan slave-holding practices. He remarked, 'Slavery in Ceylon is the mildest possible condition of Slavery – and the Kandyan Slaves are not valued in consideration of the labor

---

status. 'The hope was that slaves would not notice, that they would quietly continue to work under their masters, and that, in the absence of recruits, slavery would eventually die out.'

Slave ownership became illegal only in 1860: Klein, 'Slavery, the International Labor Market and the Emancipation of Slaves': pp. 206-207; I. Chatterjee and R. Easton (eds). *Slavery and South Asian History*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>69</sup> COR. CO 54/156, *Ceylon: Despatches*, No. 144, Wilmot-Horton to Glenelg, (21 Feb, 1838).

executed by them, but in some measure as appendages of rank, and for the performance of certain services which, being considered a badge of Slavery, cannot be obtained for hire.’ Not only was local slavery ‘mild’ according to the governor; it was also amenable to a gradual decay without the need for vigorous intervention. According to Wilmot-Horton, ‘it is highly probable that the prejudices... will gradually disappear, when the objection to emancipation will cease, and Slaves become as they now are in the Maritime Provinces, nearly valueless... Slaves being of no value, the whole system... will become obsolete and will have ceased.’<sup>70</sup> In the late 1830s then, Wilmot-Horton was supplying the Colonial Office with a rationale for inaction on indigenous forms of slavery within a framework of emancipationist intent.

‘Indigenous’ slaves were not the only group of bonded laborers to fall outside of the primary limits of Britain’s moral responsibility in this way. The fate of creole apprentices in Mauritius, freed from slavery by the 1833 Act, was set to one side by Lord Glenelg. From 1825, the Colonial Office had encouraged sugar production on the island by granting tariff equality with West Indian sugar. By 1830, acreage under sugar cane had doubled and slave prices had quadrupled.<sup>71</sup> Indentured Indian labor was thus being recruited even before £2 million in compensation money was received by the island’s former slave owners in 1835.<sup>72</sup> Between

---

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Carter, ‘The Transition.’

<sup>72</sup> The demand for workers was, however, also caused by the rapid expansion of not just Mauritian, but also Réunionnais sugar production, the decline of the illegal slave trade that had brought East African, Malagasy and Southeast Asian slaves to region, ‘worker resistance to poor living and working conditions’ and the failure of local slave populations to reproduce

1835 and 1838 the number of registered apprentices fell from 61,000 to 53,000, while that of Indian indentured laborers rose from 8,600 to 19,700.<sup>73</sup> The importation of indentured labor to Mauritius had the effect of undermining the position of newly freed slaves in the local labor market. Many apprentices ‘were literally pushed off estates’ to make way for a guaranteed, low-wage, Indian workforce.<sup>74</sup>

The sense of a British moral debt to Mauritian apprentices seems to have been mitigated by two circumstances. First was the fact that most of their former owners were French-speakers rather than Britons.<sup>75</sup> Secondly, around twenty per cent of the colonial economy was controlled by free people of color rather than white slave owners. James Stephen warned that the introduction of indentured labor to Mauritius could undermine the ability of former apprentices to acquire profitable employment. He likewise refuted the charge that apprentices had abandoned their plantations, suggesting that instead they had been forced to leave due to poor rates of pay.<sup>76</sup> However, Glenelg was in accord with the governor of Mauritius, William

---

sufficiently for employers’ needs, as well British attempts at ‘amelioration’: Allen, ‘Slaves, Convicts, Abolitionism’: p. 332.

<sup>73</sup> R. Kuczynski. *Demographic survey of the British colonial Empire*, (Oxford University Press, 1949), cited in Carter, ‘The Transition’: p. 123.

<sup>74</sup> Carter. ‘The Transition’: p. 127.

<sup>75</sup> A.J. Barker. ‘Distorting the Record of Slavery and Abolition: The British Anti-Slavery Movement and Mauritius, 1826-37,’ *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 14, No. 3, (2008): pp. 185-207.

<sup>76</sup> Carter, ‘The Transition.’

Nicolay, believing that the competition for paid employment ‘at this critical period’ would have a ‘most useful influence on the conduct of the apprenticed population.’<sup>77</sup>

Nicolay was actually in an even better position than Stephen to compare the predicament of apprentices in the West Indies and Mauritius. He had been governor of Dominica from 1824 to 1831, and of St Kitts from 1832 to 1833, before arriving in Mauritius in 1833.<sup>78</sup> In March 1838, Nicolay defended the current system of employing Indians, suggesting that the apprentices, ‘becoming accustomed to labor in the same fields with men in a state of entire freedom, will, on their final emancipation, betake themselves more willingly to their accustomed employments.’ Nicolay also persuaded the Colonial Office that it was overly optimistic to think that freed apprentices would be able to qualify for political rights. He submitted a plan that might, at the most, admit ‘a certain number (under various restrictions with regard to eligibility) into the Council of Government.’ Nicolay, however, was certainly enthusiastic about the improvement of the Mauritian government’s financial circumstances as a result of compensation money now flowing in to the island’s 7,000 former owners:

The increase of Revenue in 1836, is stated at £31,308.4.6 ¼. The principal increase of Revenue has been in the Customs Department... owing no doubt, in a great measure to the increased capital from the indemnity to Slaves... The Registration fees, in the Internal Revenue Department, have also afforded considerable augmentation in 1836:

---

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Carter. ‘The Transition’: p. 120.

<sup>78</sup> H.M. Chichester. ‘Nicolay, Sir William (1771–1842),’ in H.C.G. Matthew and B. Harrison (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20170>, (accessed 18 March, 2016).

chiefly arising from the transfers of property, attributable also, in a great measure, to the altered circumstances of the Colonial Society from the emancipation of the Slaves... From the introduction of Indian laborers in 1836, the produce of the soil should show an augmentation in 1837.<sup>79</sup>

In addition to sidestepping obligations to Indian slaves, indentured laborers, and apprentices formerly owned by non-British masters or free people of color, the British government acknowledged at best only an equivocal moral debt to Africans liberated by the Royal Navy from other nations' slaving ships. Indeed those falling into this category were considered rather to owe their British liberators a moral debt, though their impressment into the West India Regiment was still condemned.<sup>80</sup> The Colonial Office expressed its dismay at this practice when a number of captives, freed from a Portuguese slave ship, were enlisted rather than apprenticed. Glenelg wrote to Governor Cockburn that 'the welfare of the captured Africans and the interest of the Bahama Islands would both be best committed by returning them as settlers instead of permitting their enlistment as soldiers.'<sup>81</sup> Despite Cockburn's protests that

---

<sup>79</sup> COR. CO 167/198, *Mauritius: Despatches*, No. 125, W. Nicolay to Lord Glenelg, (5 March, 1838); M. D. E. Nwulia. 'The "Apprenticeship System" in Mauritius: Its Character and its Impact on Race Relations in the Immediate Post-Emancipation Period, 1839-1879,' *African Studies Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1, (1978): pp. 89-101.

<sup>80</sup> A. Rupprecht. "'When He Gets Among His Countrymen, They Tell Him That He is Free": Slave Trade Abolition, Indentured Africans and a Royal Commission,' *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 33, No. 3, (2012): pp. 435-56.

<sup>81</sup> COR. CO 23/100, *Bahamas: Despatches*, No. 45, Official Reply from Colonial Office to Lieutenant Colonel Cockburn, (12 March, 1838).

this opinion was ‘at variance with that which prevails within the Colony,’ it was insisted that military recruitment be avoided in future.<sup>82</sup> But a Colonial Office wariness about the continued virtual enslavement of liberated Africans did not necessarily translate into decisive action on their behalf. In general it seems that during the transition of 1837-8, even James Stephen wished to wash the Colonial Office’s hands of them rather than oversee their ongoing ‘reclamation’ as free subjects of the Crown. An exchange between the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office in late 1837 and early 1838 reveals this relational sense of moral responsibility.

In 1827, the island of Fernando Po off the west coast of Africa had been abandoned by the Spanish in the face of high mortality. The Royal Navy had established a station there to mount anti-slavery patrols covering the deltas and coves used by other nations’ slave ships. Despite orders to convey any liberated Africans onward to Sierra Leone, roughly 774 individuals had been left behind on the island when the Navy subsequently abandoned Fernando Po. When, in 1837, the Foreign Office wrote to remind Glenelg of the liberated Africans still on the island, they observed that ‘having been all subjects adjudicated to the Crown, by the Courts of Mixed Commission at Sierra Leone, they were all now subjects.’<sup>83</sup> Glenelg advised that the people be removed to Sierra Leone, and asked Lord Palmerston to instruct the Admiralty accordingly. On 6<sup>th</sup> July 1837, the officer sent to investigate, Commander Papham, reported that such a removal would be impossible. Having consulted with a former manager of the British station who had stayed on as a trader, Papham informed his superiors in London that only 50 of the liberated Africans remained. James Stephen was far from happy with the report, though he

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, No. 34, Cockburn to Glenelg, (15 Jan, 1838).

<sup>83</sup> COR. CO 267/150, *Sierra Leone: Offices*, No. 286, F. Strangeways (Foreign Office) to J. Stephen, (25 Feb, 1838).



acknowledged the difficulty in locating the missing individuals, given the lack of Spanish authorities on the island and that the interior had never been explored by Europeans. His conclusion: ‘the Foreign Office should be informed that ... Lord Glenelg does not think that any further steps ought to be taken for the removal of these people from Fernando Po to Sierra Leone.’<sup>84</sup> The British government, then, could wash its hands of these particular British subjects.

Between 1808 and 1855, over 40,000 Africans liberated by the Royal Navy from other countries’ slave ships, arrived in Freetown from all over West Africa and some Central African territories.<sup>85</sup> Bronwyn Everill’s recent study reinforces the claim that, rather than being liberated, they were in fact ‘recaptured.’<sup>86</sup> Both black and white settlers in Sierra Leone benefitted from this arrangement, defending their role by following the rationale that had been inscribed in the legislation abolishing the slave trade in 1806, in which ‘individuals who had experienced enslavement, needed to be “schooled” to re-acquire their freedom.’<sup>87</sup> The Colonial Office was aware that employers, both free black and white, often mistreated their assignees. In 1837-8, the office became the focal point for a trans-imperial debate about the merits of public versus private assignment, linking Sierra Leone with Van Diemen’s Land, and liberated African apprentices with convict transportees.

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, Corresponding Colonial Office Notes, J. Stephen, (3 April, 1838).

<sup>85</sup> S. Schwarz. ‘Reconstructing the Life Histories of Liberated Africans: Sierra Leone in the Early Nineteenth Century,’ *History in Africa*, Vol. 39, (2012): pp. 175-207.

<sup>86</sup> B. Everill. *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>87</sup> M. Ryan. ‘A Moral Millstone?’

During 1837-38, the Colonial Office orchestrated a discussion connecting the recaptives' condition in Sierra Leone with that of assigned convicts in Australia. In Van Diemen's Land in particular, Governor George Arthur had set out the rationale for the system of private assignment of convict transportees during the early 1830s, as the colony experienced a mass influx of both free settlers and convicts. Arthur was convinced that convicts would not only supply useful labor for the job of colonization, but that the experience of working for free settlers would itself bring about reformation of their criminal characters – a project akin to that of 'schooling' apprentices and recaptives elsewhere. Given the similarities in assignment systems, James Stephen ensured that a report on the system in Van Diemen's Land was forwarded to the governor of Sierra Leone in 1837.<sup>88</sup> Yet, this was not simply an exercise in imperial coordination. The Colonial Office had begun to question whether private assignment was really compatible with emancipationist intent.<sup>89</sup> Its own preference for an end to the system, however, emerged more implicitly than explicitly, and with due deference to the local circumstances of its governmental interlocutors.

Staff at the Colonial Office had first been prompted to consider together the fate of assignees in Sierra Leone and Van Diemen's Land through correspondence from George Maclean, agent

---

<sup>88</sup> COR. CO 267/150, *Sierra Leone: Despatches*, George Maclean to J.G. Nicholls (secretary to the African Committee), (26 Feb, 1838).

<sup>89</sup> The Colonial Office were also influenced by the Molesworth Committee whose Report, which was published in August 1838, would prove influential in bringing an end to Australian convict transportation: W. Molesworth. *Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Transportation*, (London: Henry Hooper, 1838).

to the African Committee, which oversaw British commercial interests and treaty negotiations with African polities around Freetown.<sup>90</sup> As well as the Standing Instructions on the use of convict labor from Van Diemen's Land, Maclean drew heavily on Alexander Maconochie's *Report on the State of Prison Discipline in Van Diemen's Land*. One of the founders of the Royal Geographical Society, in 1837 Maconochie transferred to Van Diemen's Land to serve as Private Secretary to the Lieutenant-Governor, John Franklin. Containing criticisms of his predecessor Arthur's system, Franklin forwarded Maconochie's report direct to the Colonial Office, where Stephen passed it on to the Home Office so that lessons for convict rehabilitation could be applied within Britain's own penal system.<sup>91</sup>

Maclean sought to apply Maconochie's account of convict rehabilitation in Van Diemen's Land to the progress of apprentices in Sierra Leone. Responding to debates regarding the propriety of assigning prisoners to private service, he wrote that by 'thus employing prisoners in the lowest state of degradation... a species of domestic slavery is introduced into the social state, injurious alike to the bond and free.' Maclean noted but queried arguments that private assignment helped to prepare apprentices for freedom, instead suggesting that it 'deteriorates the character of the prisoner and unfits... him for resuming his place among freemen.' However, he also posited that the conclusions of Maconochie's report were theoretical and as yet

---

<sup>90</sup> J. Flint. 'Maclean, George (1801–1847),' in H.C.G. Matthew and B. Harrison (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37719>, (accessed July 11, 2016).

<sup>91</sup> When Maconochie's report was published in London in late 1838, the ensuing furore among settlers, outraged at the slights it contained to the colony, caused Franklin to dismiss him.

unconfirmed, supporting prevailing official opinion that the present system afforded ‘the best school possible for moderate punishment and reform.’ Though acknowledging the coercive character of the system, he drew a clear line, refuting claims that convict assignment and apprenticeship were tantamount to slavery, noting ‘the master having no property in his assigned servant, who ... has yet a legal and accessible remedy for any exercise of tyranny and oppression that may be exerted over him.’<sup>92</sup>

While Maclean was hesitant to strongly support either side of the argument, his comments suggest general agreement with the opinions of Stephen and Glenelg. In general, the rehabilitative intent of a penal system was thought to align with the schooling intent of apprenticeship for liberated Africans. The question remained, however, whether governmental supervision or private assignment was preferable. The Colonial Office called upon John Franklin to consider whether convict labor in Van Diemen’s Land ought to be reserved solely for public works, and ‘that the convicts in private service should gradually be displaced by free laborers.’<sup>93</sup>

In late 1837, Franklin responded, expressing concern for the shortage of free labor. He bemoaned the colony’s lack of available funds for supporting the immigration of free labors to replace convicts in private employment. Furthermore, Franklin urged the Colonial Office to consider his colony in relation to neighbouring ones: ‘[t]here is one material fact which should never be overlooked; - namely, that the immense extent of available territory still remaining

---

<sup>92</sup> COR. G. Maclean to J.G. Nicholls, (26 Feb, 1838).

<sup>93</sup> COR. PRO 30/22/3B, *Van Diemen’s Land: Political Correspondence*, J. Franklin to Glenelg, (9 Dec, 1837).

open for sale in the colony of New South Wales creates a diversity in the condition of the two colonies which must be attended by a corresponding diversity in both their penal and their Immigration systems.’ With colonization proceeding apace in the Port Phillip District across the Bass Strait, Van Diemen’s land was struggling to retain its existing population, let alone attract a new free workforce. Emigrants, Franklin noted, often would redeploy shortly after arrival to territories in Port Phillip or South Australia where land was cheap and plentiful.

For Franklin, the solution was to use the convict labor supply to improve rural infrastructure and, consequently, to open new indigenous lands to colonization in Van Diemen’s Land. Franklin explained how the geography of colonization needed to change, pointing out that at present settler cultivation was limited to the large valley running through the centre of the colony.<sup>94</sup> His plan was for convicts under public management to cut new roads on an East-West axis so as to open new pasture land within under-exploited tracts. Private assignees would be essential to the development of that pastureland until such time as sales of newly accessible land could fund new emigrants from Britain.<sup>95</sup>

By August 1838, the Colonial Office had thus been persuaded of the present necessity for continued private assignment in Van Diemen’s Land. With Maclean’s judgement on Sierra Leone’s system being more implicitly than explicitly critical, and no real impetus from the governor there to change things, recaptives were also left to the devices of their private ‘employers’ for at least a further decade.<sup>96</sup> During these potentially transformative months of

---

<sup>94</sup> The Aboriginal owners of these tracts had by this time been removed to Flinders Island.

<sup>95</sup> COR. Franklin to Glenelg, (9 Dec, 1837).

<sup>96</sup> Everill. *Abolition and Empire*.

transition in imperial labor relations, then, the Colonial Office facilitated inter-colonial comparisons and made suggestions, but ultimately deferred questions of public or private assignment to individual governors. The moral obligation that the imperial government owed to enslaved and indentured Indians, apprenticed Mauritian creoles, recaptives and convicts was evaluated separately, and less critically, than that owed to the enslaved in the Caribbean, and was insufficient to demand more decisive metropolitan intervention.

### **Managing trade-offs**

Even in respect to those sold into enslavement in the Caribbean by British merchants, an acknowledged moral debt was counterbalanced by other imperatives. Although historians have identified the ways in which the transition from slave to other forms of labor came to be circumscribed by new forms of control, to contemporary elites the process was unsettling, its management deserving further scrutiny. During 1837-8 the Colonial Office was keen to assure colonial governments that the post-emancipation transition could be effected without threatening their security or prosperity. Governors in turn sought to reassure their respective elites that the characteristics marking status would be maintained despite the changed nature and composition of their labor supply. In part, and as we have glimpsed in Nicolay's Mauritian correspondence, this was a matter of creating or maintaining distinct, racially-prescribed, hierarchies of privilege, as part of a package of measures for stability during transition. Along with civil rights, the primary issue affecting security was considered to be the timing of emancipation for different classes of apprenticed labor.

The potential for emancipation to overturn an established social and economic order was viewed with perhaps the greatest anxiety by the planters represented in Jamaica's assembly.

Even by December 1837, as legislatures around the empire were preparing themselves for the aftermath of final emancipation, members of this body were still protesting the effects of the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade thirty years beforehand.<sup>97</sup> In the midst of the transition the Governor, Lionel Smith (who had alienated the planters of Barbados with his relative liberalism during the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833), was obliged to pass on to the Colonial Office an address and memorial from the planters, noting their concern that, while their own slave trade had ended, and despite the Royal Navy's attempts to suppress it, that of rivals in the Americas persisted. This had been 'to the very great injury of all classes of Her Majesty's subjects in this colony.'<sup>98</sup> Stephen patiently asked Smith to remind his planters in response, 'that the entire suppression of the slave trade as carried on by Foreign States is a subject to which the Queen attaches the very highest importance and which has occupied and will continue to engage H.M.'s most serious attention.'<sup>99</sup>

It was, however, the question of post-emancipation enfranchisement that caused the most considerable concern among the Jamaican planters. In late 1837-8, as emancipation loomed, Smith wrote to Glenelg privately with a sensitive suggestion. Given that the last election to the Jamaican Assembly had returned five more 'Coloured Party' members and a corresponding reduction in the proportion of white representatives, Smith proposed that the franchise bar be raised upon emancipation so as to prevent even more 'Coloured' members being elected. '[T]wo more general elections,' he wrote, 'would, I am persuaded, throw every white member

---

<sup>97</sup> W.A. Green. *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830-1865*, (Oxford: Clarendon Paperbacks, 1993).

<sup>98</sup> COR. CO 137/221, *Jamaica: Despatches*, No. 231, L. Smith to Glenelg, (7 Feb, 1838).

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, Comments of J. Stephen on No. 231, (7 Feb, 1838).

out of the House under the present law... because they [‘Coloured’ representatives] are not yet qualified by education and property to command the respect of the country, the consequence must be the rapid sale of property and abandonment of the Island by the few influential white Gentlemen who now reside in it.’<sup>100</sup> The Colonial Office, however, responded by vetoing any explicit racial discrimination, since it would clearly be out of step with the intention behind emancipation.<sup>101</sup>

As Smith’s and Wilmot-Horton’s varying experience indicates, in every colony, management of post-emancipation social realignment was subject to local conditions, requiring the balancing of trade-offs between emancipationist intent, both at the Colonial Office and among many governors and colonists, and the practical need to administer the empire with the cooperation of established elites. More often than not, these trade-offs meant weighing security, economic and moral concerns against each other, with local variations of outcome.

The timing of release from apprenticeship represented another necessary calculation. As emancipation neared, the Colonial Office set about gathering opinions from governors of West Indies colonies about ‘the changes of the law which ought to accompany the expiration of the apprenticeship.’ Receiving the first of these reports from Governor Francis Cockburn in the Bahamas, in February 1838, Sir George Grey warned his colleagues that ‘[t]his is the first report... so the series will probably be rapidly increasing with the arrival of every mail; it appears necessary to determine how they should be disposed of, that is whether by appointing

---

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, No. 216, Smith to Glenelg, (20 Dec, 1837).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*.



a Commissioner to examine into & report on the subject or by what other means.<sup>102</sup> With Grey's input, Stephen himself proceeded to collate the reports and issue guidance as best as he could from London during the early months of 1838.

By late 1837, the question of when to emancipate different categories of apprenticed labor was yet to be settled. From May 1835, those who had campaigned for the 1833 legislation abolishing slavery throughout the British Empire had been mobilizing to amend the 1833 Act in order to end apprenticeship for all laborers more swiftly. Thomas Fowell Buxton and the 'moderates' of the London Anti-Slavery Society, and more radical campaigners led by Joseph Sturge, agreed that Jamaican planters especially had undermined the liberatory intent behind apprenticeship and were even intensifying their abuse of the formerly enslaved. However, Buxton and the Anti-Slavery Society's campaign, based upon a rather apologetic parliamentary enquiry into apprenticeship in Jamaica, had been increasingly sidelined by Sturge's more radical activism, fuelled by Sturge's own 1836-7 investigation of apprenticeship in the Caribbean. Buxton's retirement and Sturge's triumph allowed for the Birmingham campaign to move to London, transforming itself into the new Central Negro Emancipation Committee. This body hosted a huge anti-apprenticeship convention at Exeter Hall in November 1837. In the following three months, the campaign was marked by public meetings and pressure placed upon MPs to 'do justice' to the apprentices. Petitions sent to Parliament were used by Lord

---

<sup>102</sup> COR. CO 23/102, *Bahamas: Despatches*, Comments of G. Grey on No. 41, Cockburn to Glenelg, (26 March, 1838).

Brougham to support attacks against the entire apprenticeship system established by the 1833 Act.<sup>103</sup>

Ultimately, the Jamaican Assembly capitulated to full emancipation for all apprentices on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1838. Rather than seeing this as the direct result of metropolitan activism alone, it must be placed within the context of competing narratives of apprenticeship that were circulating between the Caribbean governors, the Colonial Office and Parliament throughout these critical months of transition. While Cockburn felt that the differential timing of emancipation would pose no threat to stability in the Bahamas, not all of his colleagues in the West Indies were of the same mind. The colonies of Antigua and Bermuda, for example, had skipped the apprenticeship period altogether, emancipating their slaves immediately in 1834. E.J. Murray MacGregor, Governor of Barbados and the Windward Islands, meanwhile warned of possible ‘excitement amongst the laboring classes’ if domestic servants were to be freed first.<sup>104</sup> Stephen’s response is indicative of the general view of slavery, and its effects, held by emancipationist campaigners in Britain: ‘The association in the minds of the emancipated negroes of agriculture with degradation is too natural to exact any surprise,’ opined Stephen. ‘But it is one of those accidental prejudices which may reasonably be expected to yield to the influence of good, if not the pressure of want’ after emancipation. The immediate solution therefore lay in persuading both employers and laborers of the value and utility of agricultural

---

<sup>103</sup> I. Gross. ‘Parliament and the Abolition of Negro Apprenticeship 1835-1838,’ *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 380, (1981): p. 565; C. Hall, *Civilizing Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867*, (Polity Press, 2002), pp. 316-22.

<sup>104</sup> COR. CO 28/120, *Barbados: Despatches*, No. 272, E.J.M. MacGregor to Glenelg, (24 Jan, 1838).

work, and hence the delayed freedom of Praedial apprentices.<sup>105</sup> At this point, Stephen felt that the immediate and full emancipation recommended by the activists of Exeter Hall, ‘would have been at once a breach of National faith [to the planters, who had been promised a staggered cessation], and a sore evil to the object of their solicitude [the apprentices themselves].’<sup>106</sup>

In Barbados, MacGregor had set about establishing the necessary categorisation of apprentices, so that those to be freed immediately could be distinguished from their less fortunate counterparts. He instructed the Special Magistrates to give an opportunity ‘to any individuals deeming themselves properly belonging to the [domestic] class, to substantiate their claims to freedom,’ so that they might be emancipated in August. Anticipating their objections, he recognized that many unfounded applications would likely be submitted, but that the initial inconvenience was preferable to any embarrassment resulting from leaving petitions to accumulate unexamined. By the end of 1837, he informed the Colonial Office that 106 male and 165 female apprenticed laborers had been transferred from the Praedial to the Non-Praedial class.<sup>107</sup> As it happened, MacGregor’s pre-emptive recategorisation scheme proved unnecessary, since the efforts of Sturge’s and Brougham’s campaigns, combined with opinions

---

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, Comments of J. Stephen on No. 289, MacGregor to Glenelg, (7 Feb, 1838).

<sup>106</sup> Letter from J. Stephen to Gladstone, (18 April, 1838), quoted in Gross. ‘Parliament and the Abolition of Negro Apprenticeship’: p. 566.

<sup>107</sup> COR. CO 28/120, *Barbados: Despatches*, No. 291, MacGregor to Glenelg, (10 Feb, 1838).

submitted by the West Indies governors as well as unrest among the apprenticed themselves, resulted in the final decision to emancipate all apprentices on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1838.<sup>108</sup>

When Sturge had proposed immediate and full emancipation to the House of Lords in February 1838, the Colonial Office countered with an amendment to the 1833 legislation which would shore up the protections afforded to apprentices, seeking to satisfy the emancipationists that immediate and full cessation of apprenticeship was unnecessary. A parliamentary debate on this Abolition of Slavery Amendment Bill was prompted, however, by the abolitionist Yorkshire MP, George Strickland, who proposed, once again, immediate and full emancipation in March 1838. Strickland began by abhorring ‘that strange species of legislation which consists in saying, that the non-Praedial slaves shall be released in this year, but that the Praedial slaves shall be retained in servitude for two years longer.’ ‘Was there ever a piece of legislation which gave greater promise of dissatisfaction, irritation, and discontent?’ he asked.<sup>109</sup> However, George Grey sought to block full emancipation, pointing out that ‘a compact was made by the act of 1833 between Parliament and the West-India proprietors, with which we are not now justified in interfering,’ and insisting that the period of apprenticeship was part of the compensation owed to slaveowners alongside the payment of £20 million. He cited earlier despatches from a number of the Jamaican magistrates as evidence that apprenticeship itself was working well, with abuses few and far between. Grey mobilized this

---

<sup>108</sup> Gross. ‘Parliament and the Abolition of Negro Apprenticeship’; A. Tyrrell. ‘The “Moral Radical Party” and the Anglo-Jamaican Campaign for the Abolition of the Negro Apprenticeship System,’ *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 99, No. 392, (1984): pp. 481-502; Hall, *Civilising Subjects*.

<sup>109</sup> Hansard, ‘Abolition of Negro Apprenticeship’: pp. 40-108.

evidence in Parliament as part of an alternative geography of ‘knowledge’ to that of Sturge’s Caribbean visit, to demonstrate that ‘the most incorrect information has been circulated on the subject.’<sup>110</sup>

Strickland lost his debate, despite the considerable support of MPs lobbied by emancipationist campaigners. Glenelg’s more moderate bill for the reform of apprenticeship was passed. However, with his despatch, MacGregor improved knowledge of apprenticeship in the Colonial Office. He included reports from his Lieutenant Governors in the Windward Islands: Grenada, St. Vincent, and Tobago. All raised concerns about the effect on those retained as apprentices when others were freed of former employers’ control. MacGregor supplemented these with his own report, imparting new intelligence from Barbados’ Special Magistrates. One Magistrate anticipated that, though there might be a brief upset, ‘the Praedial class... have been so unremittingly trained, for their entire lives, to obedience and labor’ that no long-term crisis would result. He similarly observed that the non-Praedials, upon becoming free, would ‘betake themselves to an honest calling either as Domestic or Laborers, or Tradesmen, for wages.’ Another Magistrate at least admitted that interrogation of Praedial apprentices suggested they were unhappy about their situation, but likewise proposed that ‘altho’ the change will no doubt be received by the majority of the Praedial apprentices as disadvantageous to their particular interest, and perhaps as oppressive in its operation, I do not infer ... that the result of this feeling will elicit any open display of intemperate conduct, or systematic insubordination.’<sup>111</sup>

---

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> COR. CO 28/122, *Barbados: Despatches*, No. 1, MacGregor to Glenelg, (27 Feb, 1838).

However, this further correspondence also raised a number of thorny issues for the binary classification and staged emancipation of apprenticed labor. First, where did skilled tradespeople fit? One magistrate warned that the manumission of the non-Praedial apprentices would ‘cause great discontent among those of the Praedial class termed Tradesmen,’ as many were dissatisfied at the distinction made between themselves and tradesmen not tied to the land.<sup>112</sup> MacGregor supplied the Colonial Office with a case in point.<sup>113</sup> Joseph Evelyn, ‘a respectable gentleman of this island, and the employer of “George”,’ an apprenticed estate worker who supplied manual labor to skilled stonemasons and artisans, was objecting to the Magistrate’s decision that George be classed as non-Praedial and freed on 1<sup>st</sup> August. Where should the Governor stand in relation to such disputes? Stephen could provide only an equivocal response: the Governor ‘ought to advise his Magistrates as often as his opinion is solicited or whenever he thinks it desirable, leaving them to take the responsibility of acting.’<sup>114</sup>

Secondly, there would be much greater opportunity for the desertion of Praedial laborers from their employers when they could seek refuge ‘among their numerous liberated relations, and friends.’<sup>115</sup> Thirdly, there was the question of raised expectations: ‘having visited every Estate in the District last month,’ another magistrate reported, ‘and in communication with the Praedial apprenticed laborers, I found several under the impression that all classes were to be

---

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 12, MacGregor to Glenelg, (26 Jan, 1838).

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, Comments of J. Stephen on No. 12, (26 March, 1838).

<sup>115</sup> There were already signs that they would emigrate altogether: A. Johnson. ‘The Barbados Emigration War,’ Conference Paper, ‘After Slavery? Labor and Migration in the Post-Emancipation World,’ (27 June, 2016).

liberated next August, from the restriction of apprenticeship and, when that period arrives, much discontent, in my opinion, will exist with the Praedial Class; and their services to their employers for the two years ensuing, will be given with much reluctance.’ Despite one magistrate’s confidence that ‘the crisis’ of a staggered emancipation ‘will ... pass off favourably – provided the injudicious interference of Persons at Home does not produce a contrary result,’ it was precisely such interference that MacGregor’s correspondence prompted during the months leading up to 1<sup>st</sup> August 1838. Stephen noted that MacGregor’s despatch contained important information showing, ‘first, that in the subordinate Windward Islands there is some cause for anxiety as to the effect of the partial liberation on the 1<sup>st</sup> August next, and good reason for the proposed interference of Parliament on the subject of the classification lists.’<sup>116</sup> Stephen also noted that, most importantly, MacGregor’s concerns were echoed in missives being received from other islands around the same time.

Stephen, Glenelg and Grey were further pressured to accept complete and immediate emancipation by the precedents set by Antigua and Bermuda.<sup>117</sup> In Antigua, MacGregor himself had decided that apprenticeship was unnecessary in 1834, and immediately emancipated all those enslaved.<sup>118</sup> Now, in early 1838, he reminded Stephen, ‘the measure of complete and simultaneous enfranchisement was happily accomplished without accident or

---

<sup>116</sup> COR. CO 28/122, *Barbados: Despatches*, Comments of J. Stephen on No. 2, MacGregor to Glenelg, (28 Feb, 1838).

<sup>117</sup> G. Heuman. *The Caribbean: A Brief History*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2014): pp. 90-94.

<sup>118</sup> Gross, ‘Parliament and the Abolition of Negro Apprenticeship.’

inconvenience.’<sup>119</sup> Given that such a plan had already, apparently, been tried and tested, it was actually staggered freedom that was the ‘altogether untried experiment.’ MacGregor reminded the Colonial Office of the local flexibility allowed by the 1833 legislation, and suggested that the same be permitted in relation to staggered emancipation now.<sup>120</sup> Indicating his awareness of ‘the various anti-apprenticeship meetings ... recently held in England,’ led by Joseph Sturge, the British ‘immediatists’ and their Baptist missionary and apprenticed informants in Jamaica, MacGregor wished to recommend a full and total end to apprenticeship in August 1838, ‘while the subject ... engages the attention of the public’ rather than risking renewed agitation surrounding a second stage of emancipations at a later date.<sup>121</sup>

MacGregor’s representations, sent and received between January and March 1838, acted in concert with the effect of the immediatist campaign. Two weeks after McGregor’s last despatch had been sent, Strickland sought similarly to point Parliament’s attention toward the ‘great experiment’ made in Antigua and Bermuda: ‘There we see 45,000... at once set free without

---

<sup>119</sup> For a very different assessment of the ‘success’ of immediate emancipation, from the perspective of apprentices themselves, who continued to be denied property, housing, opportunities for worship, and the chance to build independent communities, see N. Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom: Antigua and the Aftermath of British Emancipation*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); N. Lightfoot. ““Their Coats were Tied Up like Men”’: Women Rebels in Antigua’s 1858 Uprising,’ *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 31, No. 4, (2010): pp. 527-45.

<sup>120</sup> COR. CO 28/122, *Barbados: Despatches*, No. 22, McGregor to Glenelg, (15 March, 1838).

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*



any intermediate state of apprenticeship.’<sup>122</sup> Three days after the vote on Strickland’s motion in the House of Commons, Glenelg sent a circular which, though maintaining that Parliament needed to respect the compact made with planters for a staggered emancipation, urged colonial legislatures to themselves abolish apprenticeship for all classes on 1<sup>st</sup> August.<sup>123</sup> He cited as his reasons both ‘the force of public opinion’ in Britain and the difficulty of maintaining ‘tranquility in the Colonies.’<sup>124</sup> In this way, Colonial Office guilt could be assuaged without violating the promises made by Parliament to planters.

Just as Glenelg’s plea was arriving on governors’ desks across the Caribbean, in May 1838, emancipationist campaigners brought a new resolution to Parliament through the Conservative MP for Warwickshire and President of the Central Negro Emancipation Committee, John Eardley Wilmot. This time, they were successful. Before Russell’s government could seek to undermine the resolution and prevent its manifestation as a Bill, the colonial legislatures themselves acted upon Glenelg’s recommendation and gave up the struggle against full and immediate emancipation.

Apprenticeship was abolished across the West Indies on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1838, in the Cape on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1838 and in Mauritius on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1839. As Tyrell describes it, the British-based campaign had ‘re-opened the issue, curtailed the government’s freedom of action, and ... created a context in which, with the Colonial Office’s approval, the West Indian legislatures

---

<sup>122</sup> Hansard, ‘Abolition of Negro Apprenticeship’: pp. 40-108.

<sup>123</sup> COR. CO 318/141, Circular, Glenelg to Colonial Governors, (2 April, 1838).

<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Tyrell, ‘The “Moral Radical Party”’: p. 498.

voted that total emancipation should take place.’<sup>125</sup> But it would seem to have been MacGregor’s despatch, received on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1838, in particular that convinced the Colonial Office to intervene so as to ensure ‘that the Legislative Bodies will accede to the Governor’s recommendation.’ Stephen had minuted on the despatch, this ‘should be laid before Sir G. Grey & Lord Glenelg. They will find that the despatch & its enclosure have a material bearing on the questions now pending before Parliament.’<sup>126</sup>

### **Conclusion**

During late 1837 and 1838, imperial authorities in London were attempting to govern the transition from apprenticeship to emancipation, and to address the question of how adequate labor might be supplied to colonial employers thereafter. We have sought to examine this process, which affected far more individuals than the Caribbean formerly-enslaved alone. We have conducted our analysis through an empire-wide, dynamic, kaleidoscopic image, limited in duration. Such a process emphasizes that this was a transition that occurred in multiple, interconnected sites simultaneously, and broaches how best to represent such far-reaching transitions historiographically. We have asked, what did the transition look like as a simultaneous, geographically variegated, phenomenon, in ‘real time?’

Our approach has been founded on a survey of much of the correspondence relating to labor relations that flowed through the Colonial Office and, to a lesser extent, the India Office and

---

<sup>125</sup> Tyrrell, ‘The “Moral Radical Party”’: p. 493.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*; COR. CO 28/122, *Barbados: Despatches*, Comments of J. Stephen on No. 22, MacGregor to Glenelg, (15 March, 1838).

Board of Control, in order to gauge how it was understood locally, communicated to the administrative hub of empire, negotiated, translated into imperial policy and conveyed back as a programme of reform, with varying results on the ground. This approach is indicative of how more geographically expansive and temporally limited approaches might reveal patterns of connection that have as yet been under-appreciated.

The labor transition of the late 1830s was characterized by myriad local inflections of laborer-employer relations; during our ‘snapshot,’ imperial governance sought to cast these relations into a moral hierarchy. The focus of Britain’s moral responsibility on apprentices who had formerly been enslaved by and for Britons overseas meant that the exclusion of others from this sense of responsibility was more pronounced. Enslaved Indians in areas of East India Company administration, indentured workers in Ceylon, creole apprentices in Mauritius, convicts or assigned ‘recaptives’ in the Caribbean and Sierra Leone, could all be managed through less morally charged, more locally opportunistic, arrangements, partly as a result of this moral hierarchy. In 1837-8, these complex lines of moral responsibility, based upon relationships between race, mobility and culpability, were negotiated in detail as correspondence flowed back and forth between these sites.

Something that is often missing from historians’ account of colonial government is a sense of the trade-offs, between places and between policy imperatives, that characterized the art of imperial government. Both the Colonial Office and the Board of Control wished to reassure colonial governments that the greater emancipation of labor could be reconciled with the maintenance of security for colonial elites. Governing the labor transition was thus a matter of balancing emancipationist intent, political stability, and economic performance. During late 1837 and early 1838, we have found that two key issues lay at the heart of the Colonial Office’s

attempts to manage these trade-offs through geographical differentiation. The first was the degree to which freed people should be incorporated in the structures of colonial governance. Here, the correspondence with Jamaica and Ceylon highlighted the issues. A reforming and broadly humanitarian Colonial Office was inclined to encourage civil and political inclusion of the freed upon the same terms as their former owners, but it would be supported by colonial governors only to the extent that they felt local elites would tolerate: more so in Ceylon, for example, than in Jamaica. The second was the timing and comprehensiveness of emancipation. Initial proposals for a staggered freedom for field and domestic slaves were abandoned across the empire in the light not only of British emancipationist campaigning and Parliamentary debate, but also of MacGregor's correspondence from Barbados and prior experience of Antigua.

Given this range of policy priorities, and the locally distributed sets of imperatives with which an imperial administration, which was itself internally heterogeneous, had to engage, we suggest that the transition to free labor is best conceived as the outcome of an assemblage of material and expressive elements of different spatial scales. Despite their complexity and the degree of the indeterminacy occasioned by their interaction, these elements (including governors, planters, assignees, recruiters, convicts, apprentices and indentured workers) were nonetheless brought into alignment through processes of governance in Parliament and the London offices, to shape a significant historical transition. After 'emancipation,' colonial labor relations continued to be frequently violent, abusive and controlling, and they continued to be determined in part through the agency of those who resisted and undermined them, but they were premised upon a different ideology of labor and differed significantly in some places from the set of relations that had prevailed just a few years earlier. Imperial governance as a whole is therefore best understood not in terms of discrete and sequential thinking about particular

regions but rather in the terms in which contemporary officials themselves saw it: as the ongoing formulation of an understanding, and the ensuing 'management,' of multiple and synchronous developments across complex networks.