

## **“lick an lock up done wid”.... When did plantation workers in Barbados truly become free?**

Slavery in Barbados was abolished in 1834. However, this by no means solved the problems of the former enslaved. The Abolition Act was ‘hastily written and contained many ill-defined clauses’ making it open to exploitation.<sup>1</sup> Slavery was replaced by an ‘Apprenticeship scheme’. When the Apprenticeship scheme ended many labourers celebrated and sang the folk song beginning “lick an lock up done wid”<sup>2</sup>. However, their problems were still not over. Today, our interpretation of “freedom” is about having rights, being equal, fair”. For the descendants of slaves in Barbados, this “freedom” was not truly achieved for many years.

In 1834 a Proclamation was made by the Governor of Barbados, Sir Lionel Smith, relaying the terms of the Abolition Act. The Proclamation explained the Apprenticeship system, meaning they would continue to work for their ‘Masters’ for no more than 45 hours a week. This meant they could have one day off a week to earn their own money and that (in theory) they would be ‘free’.<sup>3</sup> The terms of the proclamation show that in many ways, nothing had changed. In Barbados, 6600 former enslaved African-Caribbeans became ‘apprentices’. The primary aim of the Apprenticeship System was to prepare the former enslaved and plantation owners for a free market economy, it is generally accepted that this aim was not met.<sup>4</sup>

The Apprenticeship System had many consequences. Historians such as Boa and Paton have argued that this Apprenticeship System made life for women in particular very difficult. Boa refers to a ‘double burden’ – women had to work their own hours, tend to their children’s needs, and on top of this, work extra hours to avoid their children becoming apprentices.<sup>5</sup> Paton supports this argument, noting that the amount of work remained the same, if not increased, however the number of workers was decreasing after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. Therefore plantation owners were trying to get as much work as possible from their workers. Life also became harder for women because, as slaves, there was a system which meant that older women would look after the children as ‘nannies’ whilst the mothers worked, however in the apprenticeship system, this system no longer existed. Women were also expected to carry out heavier work than before.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Sheena Boa, “Experiences of women estate workers during the apprenticeship period in St Vincent, 1834-38: the transition from slavery to freedom”, *Women’s History Review* Volume 10:3, 381-408

<sup>2</sup> [http://old.antislavery.org/breakingthesilence/slave\\_routes/slave\\_routes\\_barbados.shtml](http://old.antislavery.org/breakingthesilence/slave_routes/slave_routes_barbados.shtml)

<sup>3</sup> Proclamation by Sir Lionel Smith, governor of Barbados, to the enslaved population explaining provisions of the Emancipation Act, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1834, National Archives CO 28/113

<sup>4</sup> Sheena Boa

<sup>5</sup> Sheena Boa

<sup>6</sup> Diana Paton, “Enslaved women and slavery before and after 1807”, *History in Focus* 12, 2007, University of London

Despite becoming 'free' under the Apprenticeship system punishments continued in much the same way as they had under slavery. In the 'Proclamation' the former enslaved are warned quite clearly that if they do not work they will be punished.<sup>7</sup> There is also evidence to show that male aggression towards women increased following the introduction of the Apprenticeship System – for example in Barbados, two women were refused the right to retreat to the bush to urinate by two plantation managers. They found this humiliating and refused to work until the managers were replaced.<sup>8</sup>

Another consequence of the Apprenticeship system can be seen in the letter from the Governor of Barbados to the House of Assembly in 1834. He stated his concerns that children under the age of six were likely to become destitute due to the unwillingness of their parents to apprentice their children. In the 'Proclamation' these children were referred to as 'free', however, parents were expected to either make up the work for their children, or allow their children to be apprenticed. The Governor of Barbados stated that there were around 1100 children under the ages of six, and of these, few proprietors were willing to contribute to their support.<sup>9</sup> The response to this letter is fascinating in its severity – the House of Assembly made it quite clear that they believe the responsibility lies with the Governor of Barbados and blame him for strongly encouraging parents not to have their children apprenticed – thus defeating 'the benevolent intentions of the act'

Despite difficulties, it is clear that most parents managed to ensure their children did not become apprenticed, this is noted by Boa who argues that refusing to allow their children to become apprenticed ensured that when apprenticeship ended "nearly all African-Caribbean workers were free from any form of indenture and could dictate their choice of residency and work"<sup>10</sup>. The Apprenticeship System ended earlier than originally planned, in 1838. It was then that former slaves/ 'apprentices' went out into the streets celebrating, singing 'lick and lock up done wid'. The fact that they did not do this in 1834 shows the failures of and animosity towards the Apprenticeship system.

Despite gaining their freedom, in the sense of no longer being 'owned' officially, life for plantation workers remained difficult for many years. Perhaps the same children whose parents avoided having them apprenticed, became involved 40 years later in the Confederation Riots of 1876. The primary cause of these riots is often cited as the proposed confederation of Barbados and the Windward Islands. However, it is very likely that this was one cause of many, and the primary reason for unrest and unhappiness was down to pay, working and living conditions<sup>11</sup>. The 'despatches' of 1875 describe cases of death by starvation – one of a baby whose mother had had to return to work weeks after giving birth and could not feed her daughter often enough, or worked so hard so soon that she could not

---

<sup>7</sup> "Proclamation by Sir Lionel Smith...."

<sup>8</sup> Sheena Boa, p. 20

<sup>9</sup> "Message from Sir Lionel Smith to the House of Assembly" August-September 1834, National Archives CO28/113

<sup>10</sup> Sheena Boa

<sup>11</sup> Bridget Bereton, "Post-Emancipation Protest in the Caribbean: The "Belmanna Riots" in Tobago, 1876" *Caribbean Quarterly*, Dec 2008

produce enough milk. According to the rector of the Parish Church this was a common occurrence. The second case was of a man named Samuel Bottin who was found dead in his house – the coroner returned a verdict of death from a ‘want of the common necessities of life’ – the evidence showing that he did not earn enough to be able to cover the cost of rent and food. The author of the despatches seems quite adamant that cases such as this were the primary causes of unrest in Barbados in the 1870s.<sup>12</sup> These cases illustrate the difficulties faced by the descendants of enslaved African-Caribbeans and the long lasting legacy of the slave trade.

It is clear that the path to freedom and equality in Barbados was by no means quick or easy. In 1937 there were riots due to the poor economic conditions in Barbados. It is also difficult to decide what can be meant by ‘freedom’ – yes they were free from slavery by 1838, but the legacy of slavery was long lasting. However, progress has been made. In 1951 the people of Barbados gained the right of Universal Suffrage – perhaps this marks the clear beginning of a form of equality. Or maybe 1966 when Barbados became independent under the leadership of Sir Grantley Herbert Adams? In 1984 Barbados was “known as the most stable and best-organised Caribbean location, with a literacy rate at least as high as that of the United Kingdom”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, steps forward have clearly been made, but exactly ‘when’ the descendants of enslaved Africans become ‘free’ is hard to define.

## **Bibliography**

### Books

Sherwood, Marika After Abolition: Britain and the Slave Trade since 1807 I B Tauris, February 2007

Walvin, James Black Ivory: Slavery in the British Empire, Wiley-Blackwell; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, November 2001

### Journals

Sheena Boa, “Experiences of women estate workers during the apprenticeship period in St Vincent, 1834-38: the transition from slavery to freedom”, Women’s History Review Volume 10:3, 381-408

Bridget Bereton, “Post-Emancipation Protest in the Caribbean: The “Belmanna Riots” in Tobago, 1876” Caribbean Quarterly, Dec 2008

---

<sup>12</sup> “letter from James S Lloyd analysing current political situation and two despatches from the governor reporting deaths from starvation”, 1876, National Archives CO 321/9

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.historytoday.com/graham-norton/barbados-british-empire-miniature>.

Diana Paton, "Enslaved women and slavery before and after 1807", History in Focus 12, 2007, University of London

### Documents

"Proclamation by Sir Lionel Smith, governor of Barbados, to the enslaved population explaining provisions of the Emancipation Act, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1834", National Archives CO 28/113

"letter from James S Lloyd analysing current political situation and two despatches from the governor reporting deaths from starvation", 1876, National Archives CO 321/9

"Message from Sir Lionel Smith to the House of Assembly" August-September 1834, National Archives CO28/113

New York Times article, 19<sup>th</sup> May 1976

### Websites

<http://www.barbados-beaches-plus.com/byde-mill-house-by-de-mill.html>

<http://www.historytoday.com/graham-norton/barbados-british-empire-miniature>

[http://old.antislavery.org/breakingthesilence/slave\\_routes/slave\\_routes\\_barbados.shtm](http://old.antislavery.org/breakingthesilence/slave_routes/slave_routes_barbados.shtm)