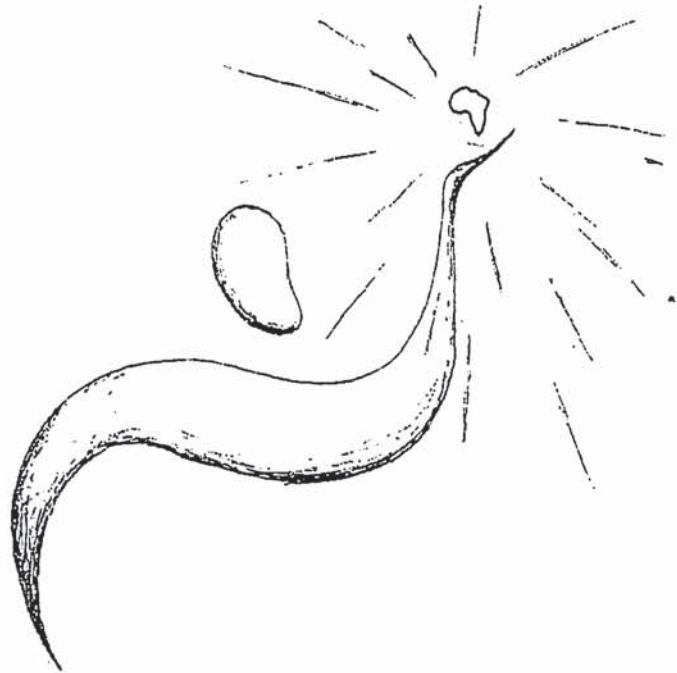


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*“In Commemoration of the 200th
Anniversary of the Abolition of the
Slave Trade”*



PANEL 1: *The Abolition Debate*

**PAPER
TITLE:** *Bleeding Heart or Subordinate
Humanitarianism? British
Abolition of the Slave Trade in an
Environment of Warfare and
Revolution*

Presenter: Michael Toussaint

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Abstract

Bleeding heart or subordinate humanitarianism? British abolition of the slave trade in an environment of warfare and revolution.

Despite the many developments which prompted the abolition of the British slave trade by 1807, the focus of historical enquiry has been on the role of humanitarian and economic considerations. The British slave trade abolition process developed, however, against a background of revolution and war in Europe and the Caribbean. This was certain to influence the British agenda and abolition imperative.

This paper seeks to examine warfare and revolution as particular dimensions of influence on Britain's decisions regarding the slave trade, including the 1806 prohibition of the trade to the conquered territories of Trinidad, Demerara and Berbice. Given that these areas were of strategic importance to Britain's attitude to the slave trade in these territories was mobilized primarily by humanitarianism or larger imperial interest there. The issue is tested in relation to the slave trade across the Gulf of Paria, and which might have been tolerated by Britain as it facilitated her imperial agenda in South America.

Resumen

Compasión excesiva o humanitarismo subordinado? La abolición británica del trato esclavista en un medioambiente de guerra y revolución.

Aunque hubo múltiples eventos que condujeron a la abolición del trato esclavista británico en el año 1807, la investigación histórica se ha enfocado en el papel de los factores humanitarios y económicos.

Sin embargo, el desarrollo del proceso de la abolición del trato esclavista británico coincidió con la presencia de revolución y guerra en Europa y el Caribe. Este hecho, sin duda alguna, había de influir en los objetivos británicos y en el imperativo abolicionista.

En esta ponencia vamos a examinar la guerra y la revolución como factores importantes de influencia sobre las decisiones de la Gran Bretaña con respecto al trato esclavista, incluyendo el decreto de 1806 que prohibió la comercialización de esclavos en los territorios conquistados de Trinidad, Demerara y Berbice. Dado que esos territorios eran de importancia estratégica para las ambiciones de la Gran Bretaña en el continente, queda por determinar si la actitud adoptada por la Gran Bretaña hacia el trato esclavista en estos

In the last decade of the eighteenth century, Britain embarked on a major power play to position itself as the principal military and economic might in the world. This involved three dimensions: the resurgence of the British sugar economy in the aftermath of the decline of that of the French in St. Domingue; the strategic geopolitical distribution of British imperial control; and the imposition a British pedagogy of right on the rest of world of, particularly regarding the mission of states and the development of global civilization. The agenda, which had been in the making over a far longer period, was actually played in three phases: that of the buildup to the abolition of the slave trade; the post abolition period leading to the Congress of Vienna and a new balance of power. Following this there was that phase of the deeper proselytizing of British morality on the road to emancipation and as part of “Pax Britannica.”

In his Black Diaspora, Ronald Segal averred that “the humanitarian constituency with an influential, largely evangelical component, pursued the moral logic of Britain’s formal withdrawal from the slave trade in 1807.¹” For a contribution to African diaspora literature, there was a lot he foreclosed, opting to limit further causation to “a mounting militancy of the British working class which assimilated abolition to its objectives” and, additionally, “the fact of British commercial and industrial interest, devoted to the profitable treatment of free trade and opposed to the preferential treatment accorded to colonial sugar produced by slavery.”² Even so, the approach might well be regarded as representative of the current middle ground in the treatment of the British abolition process, not merely concerning the slave trade but regarding also the long process of imperial abolitionism. Before and in the inter war period of the previous century, North Atlantic orthodoxy spoke to a great humanitarian movement, primarily.³ Following Eric Williams’ publication of Capitalism and Slavery in 1944, the debate acquired new

¹ Ronald Segal Black Diaspora(London: Faber and Faber 1995) 161.

² Ibid. See also Eric Williams British Historians and the British West Indies

³ Reginal Coupland Wilberforce (London: 1923) and The British Anti- Slavery Movement (London:1933). See also Ernest Marshall Howse Saints in Politics The Clapham Sect and the Growth of Freedom (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960) 10-64.

consciousness, embracing significantly the possibilities for economic determinism and incorporating a role for the social forces of slave recalcitrance and mutiny, so that, today, there is much more dialogue on the “emancipation from below.”⁴ There are other missing dimensions.

Few have discussed the abolition of the British slave trade in terms of concern with the diminution of empires.⁵ This, even though astride the evolving humanitarianism and the economic dynamics, there was a far more problematic and immediate condition of war and revolution to which the British related. War and revolution would have dictated Anglo-European and colonial relations of the eighteenth century so much so that every imperial initiative would have been governed by necessities, strategies and contingencies. It could be possibly be any less so in the crucial decades of war which closed and began the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The significance of individual territories continued to figure in the power contest and the shaping of the imperial agenda.

This notwithstanding, in the abolition discourse there remains an orientation to lump British territories together in a broadsheet assessments of their relations to causal factors without due consideration of particularities that could broaden the scope of discussions. The oversight is reflected, for example, in the treatment of the conquered territories of Trinidad Demerrara and Berbice, and just as well the ceded territories, inclusive of Tobago and St. Lucia, about all of which not enough has been said in relation to the abolition question, albeit not for want of developments in these territories over the period.

⁴ Eric Williams Capitalism and Slavery (London: Andre Deutsch 1944). For a recent survey of the literature on the state of the debate see Alvin.O.Thompson Unprofitable Servants: Crown Slaves In Berbice, Guyana 1803-1831 (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 1998)1- 4

⁵ Claudius Fergus “War, Revolution and Abolitionism 1793-1806.” Heather Cateau and Selwyn H. H. Carrington (eds.) Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later: Eric Eustace Williams - A Reassessment of the Man and His Work (New York: Peter Lang, 2000)173-195.

In 1796, for example, Britain took possession of the Berbice, Essequibo and Demerrara closing in on the realization of a long standing ambition to encircle the long sought after El Dorado and to expand immigration and investment in South America. The Dutch these colonies back in 1802, before being ousted by the British in 1803. Inter alia, the seizure of these territories was aimed at checking French expansion in Cayenne and laying the basis of further expansion of investment and immigration. That process had begun long before 1796,⁶ the logistics of the logistic of demography and colonial economy well understood. Demerrara's could survive on the remit of slaves from nearby Berbice.⁷ Sugar, though not entirely separate from territorial aggrandizement, was required to be subservient to it. This held also for the hitherto French colonies of St. Lucia and Tobago. Both were required for their importance in terms of naval strategy,⁸ as opposed to sugar, British West Indian planters being opposed to their consideration, as indeed that of the conquered territories, for the latter purpose.

Tobago, for example, chronicled the struggle for imperial dominance in the region. Hardly wanted for its own sake, its control was in effect a veritable manifestation of the state of the imperial chess game. Changing hands no less than ten times even before Amiens, it would be taken by the English in 1803 to be conceded fully in Vienna.⁹ Niddrie was more than incisive in stating that the final act of that Congress closed almost a century of dispute, in ensuring that the island became a British possession, whose legality was never again in question.¹⁰ If these were his subject matter he might have said of St. Lucia that it changed had also changed hands or of the triumvirate of Demerrara, Essequibo and Berbice that were they were also ceded in 1815. Britain had pursued and secured what it required.

⁶ D.K. Fieldhouse The Colonial Empires: A Comparative Survey from the Eighteenth Century (Frankfurt, Main and Hamburg: Macmillan 1965) 55-83.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ For data on Tobago's colonial development during the period see H. I. Woodcock A History of Tobago and K. O. Laurence Tobago in Wartime 1793 - 1815 (The Press University of the West Indies 1995).

¹⁰ David L. Niddrie Tobago.130

If the period 1803 to 1815 was critical in the development readjustment of the alignment of power, the years between the years 1802-7 saw major development with implications for all of Europe and the Caribbean by the closing of the Congress. In 1805 a Bill providing for the abolition of the slave trade to conquered territories was triumphantly passed both Houses, to take effect from the following year. For all this, the conquered territories have not been of much significance in the discussions regarding the abolition of the slave trade. The common reference to the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, without an appreciation of the years immediately preceding this important moment obfuscates important consideration related to the conquered territories in the period between Amiens and the 1807 Order in Council which proclaimed abolition of the slave trade in all British territories.¹¹ The approach allows for focus on the humanitarian basis of abolition, as though suggesting that this mattered quintessentially regarding all the British colonies. Meanwhile, it provides neither for a greater appreciation of the role of the conquered colonies in the period of slave trade abolition, nor for a more careful reading of British motivation.

Trinidad, lying just seven miles of the northeastern coastline of today's Venezuela, constituted an important part of a number of experiences during this abolition period, and well into mid-nineteenth century, and which on reflection raises questions concerning whether the British approach to abolition of the slave trade to the island, and by extension other conquered territories, emerged from a bleeding heart or from subordinate humanitarian.

This paper confronts the issue against the background an Independence struggle in nearby South America, which was of tremendous significance to Britain and in which Trinidad was deeply involved, and to a slave trade between Trinidad and Venezuela about which the British government knew much but for decade seemed prepared to very little in

¹¹ Carmichael Gertrude History of the West Indian Islands of Trinidad and Tobago (Port of Spain: Columbus Publishers, 1961) 61

consequence a far more important agenda related the acquisition of territory on the South American main.

Within months of the capture of Trinidad, the British government began to use Trinidad as a base for involvement in Venezuela's. Governor Picton, Trinidad first Governor, was inextricably linked to the Revolution of Gual and España. In 1797, these two Venezuelan creoles incorporated blacks and coloureds from Caracas in an attempted overthrow of the Colonial Regime in Venezuela. Picton had promised to assist them with men and warships.¹² After the failure of that revolt, Gual fled to Trinidad where he died in 1800.

The Audiencia de Caracas blamed Trinidad for nurturing and spreading the notions of "los derechos del hombre" that inspired the revolt.¹³ But as the circumstances surrounding this attempted revolution began to unfold, the Spanish Crown, determined to reclaim Trinidad from the British, began to pick up evidence of the collusion between high ranking British officials, Venezuelan revolutionaries and key colonial officials in Trinidad.¹⁴ The intrigue of the British, and their collaboration with Venezuelan revolutionaries, numerous French, American and other interests to overthrow the colonial regime in what is today Venezuela , provides a window into the thinking of key British officials, the significance of Trinidad to the South American question and, quite possibly, why abolition of the slave trade came so easily to Trinidad and the conquered territories. The British, eager then to get ahead of others co-conspirators British had been involved in the plot to destabilize Spanish rule in South America since 1790. In the succeeding years the band of conspirators came to include French royalists, and such leading figures as British Prime Minister William Pitt, whose administration presided over the first Abolition Bill, United States President, Senator John Quincy Adams (later, the President of the United States).¹⁵ It was another Prime Minister, Addington, who in 1801 had a plan drawn up to affect the overthrow Spain in South America, only to be interrupted by the Peace of Amiens. With the declaration of war

¹² Naipaul. The Loss of El Dorado (London AndreDeutsc) 1969. 131-154.

¹³ Trans. "The Rights of Men."

¹⁴ Carmichael, History of the West Indian Island. 44

¹⁵ Miranda to Castlereagh Jan. 10, 1808; Miranda to the Marquis of Wellesley July 25, 1810.

against France in 1803, Britain awaited an opportunity to declare war against Spain so as to put the plan into effect. This came in 1804, during the fourth administration of Pitt, and the plan to be put into effect was to be assisted by Windward troops under Admiral Cochrane. This did not materialize and it took another two years before any expedition could be mounted. On no other issue, not even the abolition of the slave trade, would one probably find as much consensus among British Prime Ministers as on that of promoting the overthrow of the Spanish rule in Venezuela, through supporting the organization of an expedition under Miranda who befriended every notable British, from Pitt, to Castlereagh, to Wellesley, as indeed other prominent leaders of Europe, the majority with an interest in the Spanish main. British colonial governors also courted Miranda, apparently positioning Britain for what they foresaw as his eventual rise to power on the Main. Remarkably enough, the official position of the British government and the evidence of British collusion is not to be found in parliamentary papers, though significantly reflected in the private correspondence of Miranda and a number of colonial governors, including Picton and Hislop. Remarkable also, is the fact that the question of Miranda's position vis-a vis the slave trade or the conditions facing blacks, is not raised¹⁶.

Miranda, regarded as the "Great Precursor" of revolution against the Spanish Monarchy organised his military assault in 1806 from Port of Spain.¹⁷ He sailed with eight boats and four hundred Americans, English, French and Irish soldiers. As before, British officials in Trinidad were once again implicated in the revolutionary activities on the Main.

Blacks and coloureds from Trinidad were not. But by then, revolutionary disturbances in Venezuela had a history of the involvement of blacks and coloureds. And it would later be that revolutionary activity on the Spanish Main would precipitate considerable movement of blacks from Trinidad to Venezuela in the early nineteenth century. This is not to say the Patriots on the main harboured any great feeling for African descended. Outside of his

¹⁶ Gilberto James Correa Trinidad of 1803 Through the Eyes of Miranda's Correspondence (Port of Spain: 2004)

¹⁷ See Allan Burns (Sir), History of the West Indies (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1954) 610.

commitment to fighting Spanish colonial rule in South America Miranda was royalist. He loathed the ideals of the French revolution and saw the Haitian revolution as a possible source of contamination of the Spanish Main. But on such matters he was probably as shady as the British.

It was probably such duplicity that endeared him to the leadership of Britain as at many levels the latter displayed a similar duplicity. He was prime bait for the realization of British ambitions on the Main. Miranda could lead a revolution against Spain while decrying one against the French monarchy. And, like the British he could support the overthrow of the Spanish Monarchy on the Main, while being repulsed by the efforts of Afro-descended Haitians. Between 1790, when the British had first courted the revolutionary ethos of Creole mantuanas in Gran Clumbia and 1802 when the Peace of Amiens had emerged to provide an uneasy truce among the Euro-powers, the colour of revolution had changed. The New World was confronted not merely with the revolutionary ethos of its white masses but also that of blacks. Napoleon so skillfully sought to bring this home to Europe that his efforts to reintroduce slavery in Haiti saw the absolute demonisation of Toussaint L'ouverture in Britain. These issues played on minds of the colonial authorities in Trinidad which, in the aftermath of peace of Amiens, was a colony in a state of flux and a land of espionage.¹⁸ Migrants from the Haiti and¹⁹ insurgents from nearby Venezuela sojourned in it. Concerning developments on the other side of the Paria, colonial officials, always sufficiently wary of revolutions, were prepared to support it, as long as it offered no scope for the involvement of blacks or basis through which the latter could threaten territorial expansion.

It is important to note that the British government gave Miranda much verbal support,

¹⁸ M. Lavayasee Statistical, Commercial and Political Description of Venezuela Trinidad, Margarita and Tobago: Containing Various Anecdotes and Observations, Iillustrative of the Past and Present State of these Interesting Countries. (London 1920).

¹⁹ Miranda to Hislop 7 Jan. 1808

inspiring his revolutionary escapade in Coro in 1806, but when the time came failed to give the final orders that would have permitted British troops to converge with his forces and launch what would more than like have been a successful campaign against royalist forces on the Main. In consequence, Miranda's expedition failed. The British continued to support and befriend him. He remained none the wiser about British duplicity. Perhaps history should not. Two clear imperatives were to be invoked in any British initiative regarding the Mainland. One involved the necessity to support the overthrow of the Spanish monarch, up to point. The other involved keeping revolutionary ambitions as distant as possible from the enslaved population of the conquered territories, all of which were strategically located for the realization of territorial expansion on the main. The splintering of society in St. Domingue, Santo Domingo and other French West Indians affected by the 1791 revolution necessitated a check on the in-migration of slaves into Trinidad which was a natural receptacle for the floating population of white and coloured refugees moving south in search of a home, either in the Caribbean, or on the South American mainland.

These were among the circumstances in which the British government passed the Abolition Acts regarding the conquered colonies.²⁰ Additionally, in all that Britain had done regarding abolition, it was also mobilized by those development indicated that its slave trade facilitated the development of competing non-British sugar producing

²⁰ For a recital of the Order in Council of 1805 see ANNO QUADRAGESIMO SEXTO GEORG III REGIS CAP. LII "An Act to prevent the Importation of Slaves, by any of His majesty's Subjects, into any Islands, Colonies, Plantations, or Territories belonging to any Foreign Sovereign, State, or Power; and also to render more effectual a certain order, made by His Majesty in council on the Fifteenth Day of August One thousand eight hundred and five, for prohibiting the Importation of Slaves (except in certain cases) into any of the Settlements, Islands, Colonies or Plantations the continent of America, or in the West Indies which has been surrendered to His Majesty's Arms during the present War; and to prevent the fitting out of Foreign Slave Ships from British Ports." 23 May 1806 in A .

colonies.²¹ The subjugation of British sugar interest and seemed a small price to pay for the realization of British ambitions across the Paria.

The passing of the legislation would have resulted in some caviling by the planter interest²² on the island. But a more significant development emerged to embarrass the British Government and colonial authorities thereafter. The legislation induced a slave trade from Trinidad to Venezuela. Such a trade had been existent even before the Capitulation when, to all intents and purposes, Trinidad and Spanish South America were one and indivisible. But the new dimension involved British, French and Spanish white and coloured planters who were now transshipping their slaves to the Mainland. Given the new legislation and clandestine nature of such operations the illegal movement of enslaved blacks across the Paria might in its incipience have gone unnoticed and unrecorded were it not for the fact that, from time to time, emigrants attempted to return to Trinidad with their slaves, particularly when there was civil unrest in Venezuela. One of the earliest cases was that of Toussaint Roubert and his sister Mary Maguerita. Apparently both of them had migrated to the Main in 1806 with all their slaves.²³ In 1815, Toussaint and Mary came to official notice only because they were desirous of returning with their slaves, many of whom were born in Trinidad²⁴ Toussaint had 68 and Mary 40 slaves who were reported to have been born on the island.²⁵

Even under the British the practice of planters abandoning Trinidad with their slaves had an earlier history. During Picton's reign he was constantly in conflict with French and Spanish malcontents in Trinidad against whom he was tyrannical. In consequence many left carrying their slaves with them.²⁶ By the second decade of the new century many

²¹ For different view see Willam Darity "Economic Aspects of the British Trade in Slaves: A Fresh Look at the Evidence from the 1789 Report of the Lords of Trade" Heather Cateau and Selwyn H. H. Carrington (eds.) Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later 137- 153.

²² Cf. Keith Radhay "Contraband between Eastern Venezuela and Trinidad 1797-1802." Paper presented to the Caribbean Studies Association Caracas 30 May, 1986.

²³ Trinidad Duplicate Despatches (hereinafter TDD) No. 136 Woodford to Bathurst, 30 Nov. 1815.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Carmichael, Islands of Trinidad and Tobago 5.

coloureds were leaving with their slaves to join forces with Venezuelan involved in the struggle for independence between 1811 and 1821. ²⁷One of Bolivar's first move, designed to muster as much British support as possible was to proclaim the abolition of the slave trade in Venezuela.²⁸ Despite Bolivar's tremendous vision, military genius and astute statesmanship, the Republic could not and did not last. By late 1812, the Republic had once again succumbed to Spanish rule with some its military leaders seeking and finding refuge in Trinidad. One of them was Santiago Mariño,²⁹ who, remarkably, the British authorities saw as a British subject.³⁰ For although he was born of a Spanish colonist, Mariño grew up in Trinidad and was educated in Port of Spain. He had also lived on an estate in Chacachacare where his grandfather had owned a grant of land and grown cotton. His family seems to have had a revolutionary streak for Mariño Senior is reported to have taken part in the rebellion of Gual and España.³¹ At the age of twenty-two young Mariño returned to Venezuela and became involved with the revolutionaries reaching a rank of note during the attempt to establish the "First Republic," the collapse of which disturbed him immensely. Committed to the revolutionary cause, he was determined to launch an offensive from Trinidad. In January 1813, Santiago Mariño embarked from Chacachacare on two small boats carrying a total of 45 men. The object of the expedition was to capture Güiría and herald a second phase of the Venezuelan War of Independence.³² While its leaders were creole whites a number of the volunteers were people of colour. ³³

²⁷ Presidencia de la República, Documentos que hicieron Historia 3-4

²⁸ Guillermo Morón, A History of Venezuela (London: George, Allen and Unwin, 1964) 93.

²⁹ Parliamentary Papers Related to Trinidad 1823.

³⁰ *Ibid.* Woodford to Wilmot, 23 Feb. 1822.

³¹ Anthony de Verteuil, A History of Diego Martin, 1784- 1884 (POS: Paria, 1987) n. p.; Lionel Mordaunt Fraser, History of Trinidad vol. 2 43-51.

³³ The History of Chaguaramas n.p./n.d Munro to Lt. Col. Lopinot, 14 Jan. 1813. Quoted in Carmichael, History of the West Indian 98-99; Papers Related, 1823 Woodford to Bathurst, No 219, 9 Feb. 1817 and TG 29 Dec. 1824; Morón, A History of Venezuela 110-118.

A significant number of slaves were also involved.³⁴ Mariño's slaves do not appear to have been the only ones from Trinidad who were involved in the expedition.³⁵ Between 1813 and 1816, a number of slaves, either belonging to coloured freedmen or acting on their own, seemed to have exited Trinidad for the Main. Unlike other territories where the enslaved were constantly engaged in acts of disturbances and rebellion, it was in running away that slaves in Trinidad expressed their desire for freedom. In this connection, there were two options: the forested interior and the Spanish Main.³⁶ The last was as good as the first for the slave population was confined to a narrow belt, ringing the coast. Communication with the Spanish Main by boats and pirogues was possible because of the open and unsupervised nature of the coast on both sides of the Paria.³⁷

There were always many traders entering and leaving Trinidad, some from the Spanish Main, others from neighbouring West Indian islands.³⁸ Many were involved in illegal slave trading.³⁹ It was a result of this that many blacks from Trinidad ended up in Venezuela. Many enslaved persons ended up as slaves in Venezuela because it was possible for Venezuelans, for example, to abduct them from areas around the coast of Trinidad. Others found themselves on the Main because they were runaways who had somehow permitted themselves to be enticed to leave the island. Generally, on arrival on the Main, they were purchased by one party or another and enslaved..

In his despatches of 1825, Governor Woodford drew the Colonial Office's attention to infractions of the laws abolishing the slave trade and which were committed because of the

³⁴ Gerry Besson and Bridget Brereton Book of Trinidad (Port of Spain: Paria Publishers, 1992) 113-115.

³⁵ Ibid. Proclamation issued by Santiago Mariño and Francisco Azcue, 11 Jan. 1813.

³⁶ Port of Spain Gazette (hereinafter, POSG) 24 Sept. 1825; 28 Sept., 1825 and 16 Nov. 1825.

³⁷ de Verteuil. A History of Diego Martin, 1784-1884 n. p.

³⁸ Conf. Woodford to Bathurst, 29 Aug. 1815. Also, see Williams History of the People 80 and Wood Trinidad in Transition 2-33.

³⁹ TDD Woodford to Bathurst, 10 May 1816.

ease of communication between the Spanish Main and the islands of the Bocas,⁴⁰ The practice of illicitly taking slaves away from British West Indian islands was not uncommon. The abolition of the Slave Trade had left some islands starved for labour. In such islands a market had emerged for slaves brought in illegally. Trinidad was one such island. But what was more, slaves could be moved easily from many points on the west coast of the island, including the village fishing village of Cedros on the south-western tip of Trinidad which was a haven for contraband trade and illegal entry and depart from Trinidad.⁴¹

It was in consequence of such problems that the British Government had passed the Slave Trade Consolidated Act. It permitted a planter to exit from a British port with only one slave: a domestic servant.⁴² But throughout the 1820s, planters in Trinidad were still attempting to import slaves illegally under the guise of the latter being domestic servants. A few were trying to leave the island with large numbers of slaves. In some instances this was a reaction to the Amelioration Laws which were introduced 1823 and imposed new measure for the protection and improvement of the welfare of slaves, Often, efforts to migrate reflected a tendency among persons from Trinidad and British Guiana to sell slaves on the Main. It was, for example, in this context that the notorious slave trader, Madame Glozier seemed to have carried a large number of slaves to Cumana and other parts of the Main.⁴³ In Trinidad the colonial authorities had difficulty in retrieving such slaves or punishing the perpetrators of the slave trade. Part of the problem had to do with the unique relationship between Trinidad and the islands in Bocas Del Drago from which communication by boats to the Mainland took place on an almost daily basis. The inhabitants of the islands of the Bocas were for all intents and purposes part of the population of the Trinidad.⁴⁴ Legally,

⁴⁰ TDD No. 633 Slavery Woodford to Wilmot Horton? 1825; also, TDD No. 645 Woodford to Bathurst, 29 Sept. 1825.

⁴¹ Conf. Woodford to Bathurst, 8 Feb. 1816.

⁴² Parry and Sherlock, A Short History of the West Indies (London:Macmillan,1956) 182.

⁴³ TDD Slavery No. 606 Woodford to Bathurst, 8 March 1825; TDD Slavery No. 612 Woodford to Bathurst, 22 April 1825 TDD Slavery No. 611 Woodford to Bathurst, 20 April 1825.

⁴⁴ TDD Slavery No. 611 Woodford to Bathurst, 22 April 1825; TDD Slavery No. 612 Woodford to Bathurst 22 April 1825; TDD Slavery No. 663 Woodford to Wilmot Horton? 1825.

therefore, there was little that could be done to stop slave owners from carrying away or stealing slaves from Trinidad via the Bocas del Drago. Additionally, over time, it became clear that the legal complexity that emerged could not always be determined solely within the context of British law.⁴⁵ The difficulties were compounded in 1825, when a circular was introduced, through which the British Government sought to prohibit the return of slaves from foreign countries who somehow ended up in Trinidad. This meant that if, according to law, slaves arriving in Trinidad from Venezuela were not to be returned, the Venezuelan authorities could be tempted to adopt a similar policy in respect of slaves from British West Indian islands who arrived in Venezuela by whatever means. Governor Woodford alluded in particular to the difficulty that could emerge if slaves could be induced to migrate to the Main in the hope of somehow acquiring freedom there:

I beg leave to report ... how very prejudicial this declaration is likely to become to the inhabitants of this island, from the frequent desertion to the Spanish Main that may then be apprehended... although the government that formerly and now rules that country has upon the principles of reciprocity always afforded a fair relief to claims of this descriptions upon the exhibition of certificates of the registry of slaves yet it cannot be expected that this course should be maintained when the benefit of it is to be denied to the slave proprietors of that country. The slave owners in this island will, if such a mode of proceeding be established, be exposed to the most serious injuries, while it may be assumed extremely doubtful if the negroes that desert will in any degree find themselves benefitted by seeking an illegal relief for the burden of Slavery.

The facility with which slaves can in the most the most brittle canoe cross the smooth water of the of the Gulf....and under such an interpretation of the law, become free on setting foot on the Spanish continent, will only be required to be known by them to induce the desertion of as many as could

⁴⁵ Ibid.

find the means of conveyance as by which not only many individuals but the families and creditors of estates on the whole coast might in one night be deprived of their property.⁴⁶

This is precisely what happened, although, remarkably, it did not seem to matter to the British government. Despite many deterrents, there were those among the enslaved who continued to attempt to escape to Venezuela in the hope of finding freedom. No less frequent was their abduction by common seamen.⁴⁷ Numerous accounts are given of the activities of this group and which were considered by all, including the British government, to be piracy.⁴⁸

After emancipation in 1834 the kidnappings continued. Many apprentices, rather than serve out their period of obligation to the planters, sought to escape to full freedom on the Main. Unfortunately, they, along with others who had secured their manumission, proved to be prime targets for kidnappers and pirates working the Paria.

In the majority of cases those abducted were not returned. Often they were never found. Our knowledge of the situation comes mainly in respect of those kidnapped and returned to Trinidad. The other important source of information comes from the records of British Officials in Venezuela. The British government had never considered the reports of any such matter to be an isolated matter. For, once a case was reported to the Governor of Trinidad or, for that matter, to any British West Indian Governor, it was passed on to the Foreign Legation in Caracas as well as to officials at the Colonial Office. In time, a sizeable dossier on the subject was built up, providing a window into the evolution of the problem and the nature of Britain's official response. In its records, the British Government referred to the matter as the "Slave Trade," a categorization that was not without basis when one considers that in Venezuela the slave trade and slavery had been abolished many times, and, certainly in the eyes of the British, retained in other forms as part of the political conflicts in

⁴⁶ TDD Slavery No. 641 Woodford to Bathurst, 29 Sept. 1825; TDD Mathison to Woodford, 17 July 1816.

⁴⁷ See POSG 1 Oct. 1828 and Trinidad Gazette, March 1822.

⁴⁸ See Trinidad Gazette 30 May, 1821. Cf. POSG 19 Nov. 1828

Republic during the first half 19th century. In 1810, for example, the very same year in which Independence was first declared, the Venezuelan slave trade was also abolished.⁴⁹ But the stakes were soon turned against blacks after a brief cooling down of hostilities between the Royalists and Patriot, until, in 1816, it became necessary for Bolivar to issue a series of proclamations which once again granted freedom to the enslaved. By 1819, however, his influence had begun to wane and shortly thereafter slavery was re-introduced⁵⁰ via the 1821 Cúcuta Slave Laws.⁵¹ Through these laws blacks could and were often re-enslaved as manumisos and aprendizajes, the status under which kidnapped victims from Trinidad easily fell in Venezuela.⁵² A manumiso was the offspring of enslaved or re-enslaved female, who consequently became dependent on the masters of his mother. An Aprendizaje was similarly obligated to the masters not withstanding the fact that he was paid a wage. Then there was the category of domestic slaves, into which kidnapped females from British West Indian islands easily fell, literally giving rise to a class of British West Indian born manumisos and aprendizajes.⁵³

In Venezuela the institution of slavery was backed by some of the most powerful individuals and groups: estate owners, politicians, military generals and political parties, who paid

lip-service to the cause of abolition.⁵⁴ But no paid attention to the British bleeding heart, especially as British subjects in Venezuela were deeply involved in the slave trade to and slavery in Venezuela. Writing to Aberdeen in 1845, Wilson stated:

I have... to report to your lordship that the principal estates in Venezuela on which slave labour is in part employed are under terms of long leases in the hands of British subjects and are worked principally by British capital. This fact is notorious although it will be scarcely possible to substantiate it by legal evidence. It is also not uncommon for British subjects to purchase, hire and employ slaves as domestic

⁴⁹ P.P. 1823 Clanwilliam to Wilmot, 4 Feb 1822 f.252-262

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid. This legislation influenced all subsequent slave legislation up to 1848.

⁵² Lombardi, Decline and Abolition

⁵³ Ibid. 46 and 60-67.

⁵⁴ F.O. 199/24 No. 4 Wilson to Palmerston, 31 Aug. 1850.

servants, and without positive evidence of the facts I incur little risk in assuring [that] they also purchased them for employment on the estates and other occupation.⁵⁵

The British government was cognizant of all of this.⁵⁶ Since 1843, the Foreign Office had been making appeals and issuing instructions to British subjects in Venezuela concerning their involvement in slavery.⁵⁷ For example, circulars had been sent out, drawing attention to Act 6th and 7th Victoria, Ch. 98, entitled "An Act for the More Effectual Suppression of the Slave Trade" which came into operation from 1st November, 1843.⁵⁸ *El Liberal*, one of the most influential journals published in the Venezuelan capital, carried notices of such circulars repeatedly. These circulars sought "to acquaint" British officials and subjects with the opinion of Her Majesty's Government that "it would be unfitting that any Officer holding an appointment under the British Crown should either directly or indirectly hold or be interested in Slave Property."⁵⁹ It was made clear that, in furtherance of this principle, Her Majesty's Government had prohibited all British functionaries residing in "Slave Holding Countries" from administering the estates of deceased persons in cases in which slaves were part of the property of the deceased.⁶⁰

The British Government had also gone some distance to stem these practices among ordinary British subjects.⁶¹ By 1846, it was declared that a British subject in any foreign country rendered himself liable to punishment by either receiving or becoming owner of slaves in payment of debt due to him or by selling such slaves and exchanging them for money.⁶² However this provision fell short through certain compromises which, to a considerable extent, reflected Britain's preoccupation with the protection of business

⁵⁵ F.O. 199/14 Wilson to Aberdeen, 1845. This was a regular complaint from Foreign Office officials.

⁵⁶ See F.O. 199/24 Riddell to Palmeston, 18 May 1849.

⁵⁷ Cir. Despatch Aberdeen to Her Majesty's Foreign Consuls, 31st Dec. 1843.

⁵⁸ F.O. 199/40: Enc. "Notice to all British Subjects in Venezuela" (hereafter, "Notice"). Caracas: Impretat de Thomas Antero.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ F.O. 199/14

⁶² "Notice". Imprenta de Tomas Antero: Caracas, 1850.

interest, at the expense of the preservation of slavery. For example, a British subject was not forbidden from transferring or receiving any share in any joint stock company, or any slaves actually in the possession of the company at the time when the Act was passed. Nor was a British subject prohibited from selling any slave or slaves lawfully in his/her possession at the time when the Act was passed.⁶³ Furthermore, a British subject was not forbidden from retaining possession or making use of such slaves under the position in which he was permitted to receive transfer or sell them.⁶⁴ Significantly, it was expressly stated that nothing in the Act was to be taken to subject to forfeiture any slave which before the passing of the Act, was the properties of owners of joint stock companies possessed by sale, inheritance, devise, bequeath or marriage. This was the same Act that said of British subjects that they incurred guilt by bartering, transferring, exchanging, selling, employing, hiring, holding or contracting for their own use or otherwise in Venezuela, slaves, or the offspring of slave known in Venezuela as manumimos and aprendizajes, Guyana Indians, Indios Guaranos, Concerdatos, or Parias of Uputa.⁶⁵ Of note too, is that the British Government considered, but stopped short of, denying protection to British subjects guilty of such practices, where their rights were infringed in slave-holding territories.⁶⁶

Needless to say, compromises such as these made it difficult for the British Government to effect the abolition of slavery wherever it existed,⁶⁷ More importantly such compromises made it difficult to put an end to trade in aprendizajes, domestic servants and manumimos in Venezuela.

If such an approach does not render spurious the British abolition efforts in Venezuela, it at least raises the question of priorities. By 1850 while it was clear that although those at the Colonial and Foreign Offices saw slavery and the slave trade as morally reprehensible, they had not acted with enthusiasm concerning trade across the Paria. Britain had long abolished

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ This was obvious from what was stated in Notice, Imprenta de Tomas Antero, 1850.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ James Walvin, "Freedom and Slavery and the Shaping of Victorian Britain," Slavery and Abolition Vol. 15 No. 2 (1994): 246-254.

Countries" from administering the estates of deceased persons in cases in which slaves were part of the property of the deceased.⁶⁰

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⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ F.O. 199/14

⁶² "Notice". Imprenta de Tomas Antero: Caracas, 1850.

⁶³ Ibid

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If such an approach does not render spurious the British abolition efforts in Venezuela, it at least raises the question of priorities. By 1850 while it was clear that although those at the Colonial and Foreign Offices saw slavery and the slave trade as morally reprehensible, they had not acted with enthusiasm concerning trade across the Paria. Britain had long abolished her own slave trade between 1806 and 1807. She had emerged as the most powerful European nation by the end of the Napoleonic Wars she had committed herself to lead a struggle towards global abolition of the slave trade and slavery.⁶⁸ She had persuaded major powers to act with a certain measure of conformity. However, notwithstanding British authority, experience the localized trade in the Gulf of Paria remained an intractable one, which to this day questions British commitment and integrity.

The British had been very tardy in responding to the problem, notwithstanding the pleas of relatives of those kidnapped and the agitation of local abolitionists on either side of the Paria. But that approach was suddenly changed following the discovery of gold around the Yuruary in 1849. Indeed, when in 1850 the British government sought to have all such outstanding cases resolved immediately by referring them to the courts to determine, among other things, the citizenship of those kidnapped, it seemed clear that Britain's abiding interest had been the development of its extra-territorial rights in what is today the disputed border zone between Venezuela and Guyana. The basis of the capitulation of Trinidad and British operation with respect to the conquered colonies might all along have been the call of the auriferous deposits which the disputed zone now yielded, not to mention the opportunities for immigration and expansion on the Main.

⁶⁷ James Walvin, "Freedom and Slavery and the Shaping of Victorian Britain," Slavery and Abolition Vol. 15 No. 2 (1994): 246-254.

⁶⁸ Ferguson James King. "The Latin-American Republics and the Suppression of the Slave Trade." Hispanic American Historical Review . Vol. 24. (1944): 387-411.