

ABSTRACT

**The Crown Slaves of Berbice:
a Study of Official Mismanagement
1803-1831**

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In 1803, during the Napoleonic Wars, the British imperial government conquered the Dutch colony of Berbice and took over the management of a number of presumed government slaves. These comprised persons on four estates and others - mainly artisans - in New Amsterdam, the colony's capital, who comprised a group known as *winkel* (i.e. 'shop') slaves. At the end of the war the British government accepted the submission of the Netherlands government that the slaves really belonged to the Berbice Association, a private shareholding company, and returned the estates to that Association. However, the negotiations for restoration inadvertently omitted the *winkel* people, and so these remained the property of the British imperial government until their emancipation in 1831.

This study argues that the imperial government proved to be highly delinquent in overseeing the properties and often in appointing the right persons to administer them;

and that it was only in the last few years before abolition that it addressed the issue of the Crown slaves in any sustained manner.

The thesis makes a contribution to the study of Caribbean history in five main ways. Firstly, it deals with state slaves in the region, a subject that has been dealt with only very briefly before. Secondly, it chronicles and discusses the management of Crown slaves in the era of amelioration. Thirdly, it locates several leading humanitarians in the role of slave administrators, a position which gave them a unique opportunity to demonstrate their skills as reformers. Fourthly, it attempts to give a much higher visibility and individuality to slaves than is the case with most studies on slavery. Finally, it gives the opportunity to dozens of enslaved people to speak for themselves, through the testimonies of their experience recorded by a Commission of Inquiry in 1825. It is particularly in this last respect that this study seeks to make an important contribution to the understanding of the slaves' experience.