

ABSTRACT

A History of Children in Nineteenth Century Jamaica

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This thesis argues that changes in the conditions of life for children in nineteenth century Jamaica were largely a function of economic factors. Positive changes came to the basic care for slave children when abolition of the slave trade necessitated the need to create a self generating labour force. Probably the most significant gains were the emphasis on improved diet, the right to start working at a later age, for shorter hours and at less demanding tasks, though this was by plantation standards. Some lost these gains during apprenticeship when the most negative attitudes to young children were observed because they no longer contributed to the labour system. Emancipation gave all children the chance to enjoy a higher standard of living free from the racial and social restrictions the slave economic system had imposed but it was free labour and the development of a successful peasant class which enabled some Negro children to enjoy these rights. However, more children stayed alive and lived longer after emancipation. The state of the plantation economy created most of the changes in the quality of life for all children irrespective of race or ethnic customs which quite often could only be maintained where socio-economic status allowed. Even white children saw a reduced standard of living during periods of economic decline. More children of all races went to schools because of the social changes Crown Colony Government brought but economic status determined which children benefited most. Ethnic practices tended to maintain traditional customs for children rather than introduce changes. The growth of ideas on the special characteristics and needs of children guided these changes but did not initiate them outside the largely white upper class. This continuous process of change in the conditions of life for children revolved around these changing economic phases.