

**OBSERVATIONS ON THE PRESENT  
CONDITION OF THE ISLAND OF  
TRINIDAD, AND THE ACTUAL  
STATE OF THE EXPERIMENT OF  
NEGRO EMANCIPATION**

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Observations on the Present Condition of the Island of Trinidad, and the Actual State of the Experiment of Negro Emancipation by William Hardin Burnley

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**WILLIAM HARDIN BURNLEY**

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BY  
WILLIAM HARDIN BURNLEY,  
CHAIRMAN OF THE AGRICULTURAL AND IMMIGRATION SOCIETY  
IN THAT COLONY.

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OBSERVATIONS  
ON THE  
STATE AND CONDITION OF THE COLONY  
OF  
TRINIDAD.

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*[The Figures in the margin refer to the Questions in the Evidence.]*

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SEVEN years have now passed away since slavery was abolished throughout the British dominions by an Act of the Imperial Parliament; and three years have elapsed since the labouring population of the West Indies have been put into possession of social and political advantages, unexampled in extent at any period of history.

Yet the question, "Has the great experiment of negro emancipation succeeded?" is still asked, not merely by ordinary inquirers, but by philosophers and statesmen who have access to all printed documents, private or official, and whose chief business is investigation. It is impossible that doubts could exist with respect to important transactions in such near dependencies, where seventeen governors are writing and forwarding despatches by every packet, and from whence numerous public journals, hundreds of letters, and many ocular witnesses are continually arriving, unless the truth were obscured by the misrepresentations of party spirit.

Unfortunately, although slavery has ceased, the angry feelings occasioned by the struggle to effect it have not yet subsided. The same parties are still arrayed against each other, and new causes of contention have arisen: first, with respect to the system by which the labour of the emancipated negroes should be regulated, and subsequently, as to the necessity of increasing the labouring population; which the planters insist upon as absolutely requisite to uphold cultivation in our sugar colonies, whilst the anti-slavery party deny it, and impute the claim solely to a perverse desire to introduce a new system of coercion, as unjust as the one recently abolished. The obscurity arising from these conflicting assertions is further increased by the peculiar circumstance, that nearly twenty islands in the Archipelago of the Antilles are classed together under the generic term of the British West Indies, no two of which present the same combination of extent of territory and amount of population; on which combination, nevertheless, the whole theory of productive labour depends. What dissimilarity, for instance, can be more striking than that exhibited by the crowded population of the small Island of Barbados, which exceeds in density the most thickly-peopled countries in Europe, and the scanty population of Trinidad, scattered over a surface of two thousand four hundred square miles? And when it is further observed, that the dense populations are found in the earliest settled colonies, with soils partially exhausted, and the scanty populations only in those recently acquired, possessing fertile virgin soils, the dissimilarity between them, as influencing the question of labour, is rendered still more striking. It is consequently not difficult to prove from the statistics of one island circumstances the very reverse of those which prevail in another; and no sparing use has been made of the unfair advantage thus afforded, in



endeavouring to mystify the public of Great Britain with reference to many important circumstances.

In the hope of assisting to clear away the confusion and obscurity resulting from these various causes, the Immigration and Agricultural Society of Trinidad collected the annexed evidence on which the present observations are founded. The whole is now submitted to the public as information which may be useful to every impartial inquirer in his endeavours to ascertain the true state of this great and interesting experiment—interesting, above all, in its future consequences to the human race, as there can be no rational hope of the extinction of slavery unless it succeed.

It is proper, however, to remark, that the materials here collected belong solely to the Island of Trinidad, and can only be taken as a sample of what may be expected in colonies similarly situated. An acute inquirer, nevertheless, will find, not only in their close agreement with results exhibited by some colonies, whose circumstances with respect to territory and population are analogous to those of Trinidad, but also in their wide difference with others where no such analogies exist, a confirmation of truths essential to the solution of the problem of profitable free labour. Moreover, the study of the progress of this experiment, in Trinidad especially, is important in another point of view. In the first place, it is a Crown colony—that is, governed in Great Britain: the inhabitants possess neither charter, legislature, nor municipal authority, by which to oppose any regulations established. The experiment therefore has, in Trinidad, been made exclusively under the guardianship and responsibility of Government. Secondly, there exists in that island an equality among all ranks, unparalleled elsewhere; the proprietor of large estates having no more political weight than the poorest

labourer. None of the evils, therefore, which have arisen in that colony can be imputed either to the power or hostility of the planters. Further, there has existed no combination among them to depress wages, nor have any efforts been made to exact rents: the former having been paid lavishly, and cottages gratuitously furnished. Finally, no religious differences have tended to increase the difficulties of the experiment. It has had throughout in that island the fullest and freest course, and the results, consequently, depend upon, and may be traced back to, causes less complicated than those exhibited by other colonies.

Some slight pretension to an acquaintance with the theory of the subject may be discerned in the course of these observations, which the Committee, in consideration of the grave circumstances that have forced the study of it upon their attention, trust will be excused. To a larger share of practical knowledge they boldly lay claim, and flatter themselves that, in the present improved state of public feeling, this will no longer be considered a disqualification for the task. In its performance they have exerted a conscientious determination to elicit truth; and they ask, for the whole, only a patient and fair examination.

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If we inquire into the state of slavery at any period or in any place, we find it uniformly simple. Brute force and implicit obedience are its ruling principles, and it only varies in the greater or less degree of intensity in which these are applied.

Free labour, on the contrary, is governed only by the moral force of necessity; but being modified by every form of social and political government, by climate and by local position, it is found in various shapes, from the simplest, which commences amongst the Hunter tribes in North America, and, running onward through every gradation of pastoral and

agricultural life, ends at last in the complicated system which rules one hundred millions of labourers in our Eastern Empire, where policy and priestcraft have for a series of ages so bound them in the institutions of caste, that their moral faculties have become enchained, and it is now occasionally difficult to distinguish the ryot from the slave.

Even in the civilized states of Europe, so similar to each other in many respects, free labour is found to vary considerably. It is powerfully affected, in addition to the causes already mentioned, by the different systems of taxation prevailing in each; and wherever the united influences of climate, locality, government and taxation operate most stringently, there the most steady and industrious labour is produced, which is illustrated in the contrasts exhibited by the Neapolitan, for whom nature has so liberally provided, and the Hollander, compelled to make the soil on which he lives. But at no time and in no place has free labour (as it is termed) been exempt from a moral compulsion; it is nowhere found pleasing to man; and it is always the result of a hard necessity which has been imposed upon him.

These remarks upon the origin and diversity of free labour, although sufficiently trite, are introduced to show the necessity which existed of considering and selecting beforehand, from amongst the great varieties alluded to, the particular system of free labour which we intended to adopt in our colonies; and of carefully framing, some time previous to the extinction of slavery, all the regulations under which the system selected should be explained and enforced. Surprising as it may appear, nothing of the kind was attempted; and one of the most extraordinary circumstances attending this important experiment was the entire absence of all preparation with which it was entered upon on the 1st August 1838. App. (D.)