

King Sugar and the Prophets

Geoffrey D. Johnston

The most important single factor in British West Indian history is sugar. In the beginning the British colonies were not substantially different from those on the mainland. They were settled by small farmers who grew tobacco as an export crop. But in the seventeenth century the Virginians drove West Indian tobacco out of the British market and the colonists had to look for alternatives.

The crop that caught their fancy was sugar, introduced from Brazil by the Dutch in the middle of the seventeenth century. Because sugar became immensely profitable it drove all competitors from the field. But the introduction of sugar had tremendous social consequences. Because it could not be shipped as cane it required a mill. Because at the time refining was not separated from cultivation a sugar establishment had to be large enough to support a factory, about three hundred acres. Because sugar cultivation is back breaking work no Englishman would work another Englishman's fields if he could avoid it. But labour was essential. When the cane was ripe it had to be cut, when it was cut it had to be milled. The planters therefore set looking for other sources and eventually settled on the African slave trade.

Thus sugar was largely responsible for the makeup of British West Indian society both during slavery and to a great extent after it. Sugar converted the islands from communities of small farmers into communities of plantation owners. Sugar introduced slavery, slavery in a particularly barbarous form, and its barbarity was compounded by the fact that the slaves were black and the owners white.

The initial Christian presence in the islands was provided by a rather lackadaisical Church of England, which saw itself primarily as providing a chaplaincy to the planters. A notable exception of course was the Anglican plantation at Codrington in Barbados, but for the most part the Church of England did not become a significant factor in the life of the West Indies until it was prodded into action by events associated with the coming of the Evangelicals.

The first evangelicals in the West Indies were the Moravians, who arrived in St Thomas in 1732. Their work grew slowly in rather difficult circumstances for the next seventy years but they were able to establish themselves in a number of islands, especially for our purposes, in Jamaica in 1754. Also in 1754 Methodism began filtering into the islands becoming very widespread through the energetic labours of Thomas Coke after 1786. Four years earlier, in 1782, the Baptists arrived in Jamaica. Finally in 1824 the Scottish Missionary Society established work on the north coast of the same island. These four varieties of evangelicals, Moravians, Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians form the focus of the first part of this study, which for reasons of space and the availability of sources will be limited to Jamaica. (1)

But first something should be said about the evangelical approach. As is well known the evangelicals in England were closely associated with the campaigns for the abolition of the slave trade and later of slavery itself. It is less well known that their case against slavery rested less on evangelical theology than on natural law. The evangelical message concentrated on the acceptance of salvation through Christ,

followed naturally by the cultivation of a sober godly and a righteous life in this world and eternal belessedness in the next. When they came to put the case against slavery in ethical terms they argued from natural justice, from that natural law which Locke said was discoverable by reason rather than revelation. The ethical concerns of the evangelicals were primarily personal concerns. sobriety, industry, chastity, honesty, problems which could be handled by individual decisions. Such a concern followed naturally from their theology. Salvation was an intensely personal matter; it is not surprising that ethics would be personal as well. But their theology did not seem adequate to deal with social ethics; in this field the case rested on philosophy rather than theology. (2)

If a question like slavery therefore was handled in terms of philosophy rather than theology it is not surprising that the evangelicals differed among themselves, especially when they moved to the West Indies and found themselves caught up in the ambiguities of actually living in a slave society. By 1824 it is hard to find any missionary prepared to defend slavery in principle, but they differed over what to do about it. The Baptists were probably the most consistent opponents. William Knibb, one of the best known of the Baptist missionaries in Jamaica noted in his diary in 1824, on his first trip out, that he had met a slave owner on the ship. He described the man as "an odious example of the brutalizing and immoral tendency of the execrable system, which calls loudly . . . for the curse of every friend of common decency," and went on to pray that he might "never view with indifference a system of so infernal a nature." (3) His prayer was answered. J.M. Phillippo, Knibb's colleague would sometimes purchase a slave when the alternatives were worse, allowing the person to work off his or her emancipation on fairly generous terms. Knibb conceded that Phillippo had a point, but on balance felt that the practice did more harm than good.

The Methodists were a good deal more cautious. Many of their men came to the islands young and unmarried, often finding their wives among the daughters of West Indian families. Some of these women owned slaves, or acquired them by inheritance. Their husbands were put in an awkward spot, for while they believed slavery was bad they also believed that indiscriminate emancipation was worse. Freeing a slave was expensive, for the owner had to post a sizeable bond against the pauperism of the freed slave, and even if the slave did not become a pauper there was no guarantee that he would be any better off in freedom than he had been in slavery. To make matters worse the English Methodist Conference ruled in 1807 that no minister could hold slaves, and the ruling was extended to include their wives. A number of good Methodist ministers, unable to square their domestic responsibilities with the Conference ruling had to leave the service.

But whatever their differences in tactics all the evangelicals shared certain fundamental principles in policy, principles which were admirably stated in the Baptist instructions to their missionaries. Whatever their personal views missionaries were to have "nothing to do . . . with civil and political affairs". The gospel of Christ "far from countenancing a spirit of rebellion or insubordination, has a directly opposite tendency." The missionaries were to conduct themselves after the example of the Divine Teacher so that "none will justly be

able to lay anything to . . . (their) charge." (4)

Two observations may be made on these instructions which apply equally well to the Methodists Moravians and Presbyterians. (5) First, it is perfectly intelligible in terms of the evangelical understanding of the gospel. Salvation was personal; ethics was personal as well. Secondly, and probably of greater significance for the missionaries, staying out of politics meant staying out of trouble. The planters controlled the island; they could make life difficult at any time. The support, or at least the acquiescence of the plantocracy was essential to their work. Further, the road to the slave quarters was private property. Not only did the planters as a body control the island, as individuals they controlled access to the slaves. Thirdly, Jamaica was a very volatile society, and the last thing any missionary or missionary society wanted ~~to~~ was to become implicated in a slave revolt.

The missionaries then could agree that slavery had to go, and that they should have nothing to do with the process. They also agreed that whatever method was chosen it had to be constitutional. This point can be illustrated by missionary activity during the Jamaica slave revolt of 1831.

The revolt was limited to a few parishes on the north coast. The slaves fired a number of cane pieces right after Christmas 1831, the planters withdrew to the coastal towns and after a few mistakes put down the revolt with more than their usual ferocity. Murray and Bleby, the two Methodists in the district heard of the affair a few days before it happened and urged upon their people the immorality, the illegality and the futility of resisting authority. Rather they should leave their liberation in the hands of God. Hope Waddell, the Presbyterian, came upon a group of malcontents during the emergency and used very similar arguments, except that in addition to urging them to trust in God he pointed out that their cause was being urged with every prospect of success in England, and that the revolt would only embarrass their friends. Providence, he was suggesting, was already at work in England. (6) The slaves' part was to behave like peaceful God-fearing citizens. The missionaries were in full sympathy with the slaves' cause, but in total disagreement with the means chosen. Revolt was not just immoral, it was illegal.

So persistent were the missionaries in the pursuit not just of non-violence, but even of non-action, that one wonders how they ever became associated with emancipation at all. Their direct participation in the campaign was rare, but when it came, it came not because of an attack on the liberties of the slaves, but because of an attack on their own freedom of action.

The revolt of 1831 was followed by the formation of a reactionary white man's organization called the Colonial Union. The Union, blaming the revolt on the missionaries set fire to a few Methodist and Baptist chapels. This attack on the liberty of preaching goaded the Baptists into sending William Knibb, one of their best platform orators and a man thoroughly familiar with the events of 1831-1832

to plead their cause in England, the cause, not of emancipation but of freedom of preaching. (7) When Knibb reached England he argued for the final solution: only with emancipation would the mission be free to operate. The Baptist Committee was divided, but when Knibb forged ahead and got a tumultuous response to a speech in June 1832 the hesitant came around. Knibb and a few others then took to the stumps for emancipation. Although the missionaries are remembered as friends of the slaves it took an attack on their own liberties to bring them out into the open as advocates of emancipation.

Since the evangelicals believed that salvation was essentially a matter between God and individuals, since they were strictly enjoined to stay out of politics and since they were constitutional reformers anyway, it is at first sight difficult to see why the planters bothered with them at all. Most of the time they didn't; most of the time the work went on in peace. But the Bible is a dangerous book. To put it in the hands of sincere but somewhat intemperate men was a risky business. Sam Sharpe, the slave who led the revolt of 1832 was a Baptist deacon, one of whose favourite texts was "No man can serve two masters." While the missionaries might be able to maintain their political innocence, the same could not be said of their converts.

But the missionaries were dangerous simply because they were there. Ministers must take their people seriously, as human beings for whom Christ died. To take the slaves seriously as human beings was to introduce an element of moral equality into slave society, an equality which was itself subversive, especially when Jack turned out to be a better man than his master. A revolutionary interpretation of the Bible might be a kind of occupational hazard, something the missionaries would take pains to avoid, but the acceptance of slaves as people was essential to the preaching of the gospel. It was probably a dim appreciation of this fact that led the planters at times to take arms against the evangelicals, or more commonly, try to outflank them with the Church of England.

But it was to no avail. Emancipation came in a partial form in 1834 and without restrictions in 1838. But while emancipation altered it did not eradicate the basic structure of West Indian society. It remained a world of white planters and black labourers, hierarchical and shot through with racial bias, and it would remain so as long as the fundamental economic unit was the plantation. In many islands there were no alternatives. All the arable land was held down in sugar. But in Jamaica a different approach to making a living was possible. It is a mountainous island and in the years before emancipation sugar had been retreating from the mountains to the river valleys where it could be grown most profitably. The 1840s saw the beginning of a movement which lasted for most of the nineteenth century, a movement of erstwhile sugar workers off the estates to become either small farmers or agricultural labourers living in their own houses on their own land.

Evangelical response to this development varied from enthusiastic to sceptical. The Methodists were the most cautious; H.B. Foster's comment on the movement stressed the additional labour and expense

it involved rather than the challenge of working with an independent peasantry. (8) The other evangelicals were more positive, especially the Baptists, who have a long string of "free" villages to their credit, villages which were established through missionary initiatives, and often with missionary financing.

But a consideration of the motives which led missionaries to found villages reduces somewhat one's enthusiasm for them as agents of social change. Some, like Knibb, were concerned because reactionary planters were raising the rents on estate housing or expelling the workers altogether. George Blyth, the Presbyterian, established villages so that he could keep people who were going to move anyway within reach of church and school. Clark, a Methodist, was worried about the dismal quality of estate housing and its effect on home and family life. The Moravians, following their own peculiar experience tried, with indifferent success, to found Moravian villages, as distinct from secular villages with a Moravian church. (9) But none of them became active in the movement out of the conviction that the social health of the island depended on the dethroning of King Sugar. As might be expected Knibb came closer to it than anyone. Jamaica, he declared, would never be "truly prosperous or happy while she is entirely dependent on a foreign market for nearly all the necessities of life . . . (She) . . . will be much improved when the necessities of life are more plentifully grown even though a few tons of sugar less leave her shores." (9)

But even with Knibb this is a secondary argument. Missionaries became involved in freehold settlement for ecclesiastical reasons, or, in districts where rack renting and expulsion were widespread, out of a sense of common justice. This sense of common justice was the nearest the missionary community ever got to a Christian social philosophy. It remained instinctive, rudimentary and uninformed by any rigorous theological analysis. Insofar as these men thought about social questions at all they thought in secular terms. Insofar as they acted on social issues they were guided both during slavery and after it only secondarily by a sense of common justice. For the most part they acted in the interest of the mission, in the interest of the gospel as they understood it, the good news of individual salvation.

Part II

The Canadians in Trinidad

Emancipation found two colonies in the British Caribbean, Trinidad and Guyana with a sugar frontier still open to the enterprising. The free slaves reacted to sugar cultivation much as the free English had a century and a half earlier; almost anything was preferable. Once again the planters cast their nets abroad for labour and this time they found it in India. If Africa supplied the labour for the first Empire, India supplied it for the second.

Indians were brought to Trinidad and Guyana from 1846 to 1917 under a system of publicly supervised contract labour, indenture, as

it was called varied widely from time to time and place to place, but in general men, and women, were recruited to ~~work~~ for a specified period, normally five years, although the last two could be bought off at three pounds a year. Employees were entitled to the minimum wage, free housing and medical care and after ten years "industrial residence" to a free, though later only an assisted, return passage. On the other hand they were subject to a number of onerous disabilities, usually related to freedom of movement off the estates.

While contract labour is rarely a pleasant system this one at least tried, by the standards of the time to be fair. Its critics have fastened not so much on the principle as on the practice. Eric Williams has charged that even in its later more refined stages the system was inefficient unhealthy and oppressive. It was unhealthy because in 1911 there were 24,000 cases reported in estate hospitals out of some 10,000 people under indenture. Many of them were suffering from diseases which could have been prevented, malaria, hookworm and anemia. It was oppressive because while men were supposed to be making twenty-four cents a day, better than fifteen percent could be found making less than twelve. More serious was the high rate of prosecution for breach of contract. Between 1900 and 1912 almost 8000 people were charged and of these less than 1500 were dismissed. If in slavery the taskmaster was the whip, in indenture it was the jail. Finally the system was inefficient because barrack life bred sickness, because the compulsion inherent in estate practice meant that the men's only weapon was passive resistance, and because an abundant supply of cheap labour, supplied partly at the public expense removed pressure on the planters to mechanize, especially in the fields. (10)

Eric Williams is a masterful but not always detached historian. Yet even a more impartial student like Keith Laurence has no illusions about indenture. He points to the incidence of strikes and riots after 1860, from which the "free" Indians kept aloof, and to the extraordinary frequency of breaches of contract in the last years of the system. It is surprising therefore to find that the missionaries most closely associated with the Indians have hardly a word to say against indenture.

The missionaries in this case were Canadians, initially from the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces of British North America, and after 1875, though still largely Maritimers, from the Presbyterian Church in Canada. The mission began with the arrival of John Morton, late of Bridgewater Nova Scotia in 1868. Morton had convalesced in the West Indies a few years earlier and had been struck by the way the churches in Trinidad neglected the Indians. They were a people apart, by language, by caste, by religion, by culture and by race, and the Trinidad churches had been unwilling or unable to bridge the gap. Morton, his colleagues and his successors operated a mission to the Indians and to this day Presbyterianism in the Eastern Caribbean is an Indian phenomenon.

Unlike the evangelicals in Jamaica the Canadians did not have to keep silent. Yet they not only refrained from attacking the system, they defended it publicly. In 1875 Morton argued that the immigrants

could hardly be called slaves because they came of their own free will and were protected by law. (11) In 1909 he declared that while there were failures among the Indians the rate was no higher than in any other system and that on the whole indenture was good for the Indians. (12) Two years later, his colleague, K.J. Grant wrote in a Halifax newspaper,

to those who would reply that this system of immigration is slavery under another name we reply, and we do it deliberately, and with the knowledge acquired through close contact with it for thirty-seven years, it is free from the distinguishing features of slavery. The interests of the weaker party are wonderfully guarded by wholesome laws, framed as the necessities arose, and these laws are by no means a dead letter on the statute books. (13)

The discrepancy between modern historiography and missionary comment lies in political philosophy. In 1909 George Fitzpatrick, Indian, Presbyterian and lawyer argued for the reform of the system on the ground, inter alia, that it provided for the prosecution at criminal law of a breach of civil contract. Although the distinction is a crucial one, Morton never mentions it. A breach of civil contract is a dispute between individuals prosecuted under civil law with the state acting as arbiter. But in criminal law the state abandons its role as umpire and becomes a party in the dispute. By making breaches of the indenture contracts part of the criminal law the state took up, for the most part, the side of the planters. Morton ignores this question, not simply because he was a preacher and not a lawyer but also because he was a very conservative person.

In 1884 Morton gave evidence before Sir H.W. Norman, who was conducting an investigation into the so-called Hosea riots, in which the police fired into an illegal demonstration killing twelve East Indians and injuring eighty. Morton supported the government's action without qualification. He admitted that work was short; he admitted there might have been other factors, but the principal reason for the riots was Indian "insubordination". Since the shooting, he continued, their conduct had improved enormously. They had realized "that the law had to be obeyed by them as well as everyone else." (14)

Almost thirty years later he commented that while popular government had certain "educative" influences it was "conducive to lies, slander, and evil speaking, and elections cost a great deal in money and strife." (15) A man whose general approach to politics was of this type could hardly be expected to turn up a critic of a system which had brought much of Trinidad under cultivation and provided an opportunity for thousands of Indians to find a better life. At the same time it must be remembered that indenture was a system of its time; many parallels can be drawn between the experience of the Trinidad Indians and Europeans in Canada or the United States. The Empire itself was a system of the time. Morton consistently refused to intervene in labour disputes, preferring to send the men to the officers of the immigration department where he was confident they would get justice. Morton was an imperialist and imperialists assume a high level of virtue among the colonizers.

But if Morton was a conservative he was a constructive conservative. Central to his thinking was the welfare of Trinidad and central to Trinidad's welfare was Indian immigration. In 1877 he argued for systematic importation of Indian women, outside the indenture system, in order to encourage the men to stay on the island. He would not have wanted them to stay if he had not regarded them as valuable citizens.

At first he thought of them as valuable for the sugar industry, and the sugar industry as essential to the island. But his views changed as the years went on. Indians who had completed their indenture did not have to return to India; they were free if they wished to stay in Trinidad. By the early seventies people were taking up Crown land and going into farming, but the real development of a Trinidad Indian peasantry did not begin until the sugar crisis at the end of the century. In 1885 Morton was doubtful whether they would make out "The Hindoo is not as sturdy as the Saxon" (16) By the turn of the century his fears had been laid to rest. In 1899 he was able to suggest the abolition of the indenture system altogether, replacing it was a colonization scheme with a short period of contract labour at the beginning. In the same way he became less dogmatic about the importance of Indian labour for the sugar industry. By 1906 he could see them as important both for sugar and for small farming. (17)

Morton was immensely pleased with the Indian response to hard times. When work became scarce and wages fell in the sugar industry thousands of Indians simply packed up and left, working their way into the mountain valleys to become cocoa farmers or into the Caroni swamp to grow rice. Morton was a free enterprise man; the schools he ran inculcated the standard Victorian virtues, industry, thrift, sobriety, piety, qualities which tend to produce individual prosperity in a frontier society.

Confidence in the Indians, the welfare of Trinidad, and a belief in free enterprise were the poles around which Morton's social thought revolved. But what made him a particularly significant figure in Trinidad and more articulate on social questions than his colleagues was his interest in agriculture. Morton was always a farmer at heart, a successful gardener in his own right, a founding member of the Agricultural Society and for a time Chairman of the local Road Board. But all this activity was a hobby, something he did in his spare time, it did not develop naturally out of his theology. Morton's central theological concerns had to do with sin, with the reconciliation of individuals with God. (18) His contribution to public life in Trinidad was bereft of theology, and his interests did not become part of the heritage of the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad.

After Morton's death social questions ceased to concern the church. If anything they did their best to avoid them. But when, in the late thirties things became so bad on the sugar estates that social problems could no longer be ignored the East Indian leadership stepped into Morton's shoes. But their concern arose not out of theology but communal solidarity; it was their own people who were suffering. (19)

24

No more than the British in Jamaica did the Canadians or the East Indians in Trinidad apply theology to society.

Prophetic preaching is immediate, and it is founded on the word of God. One can say "Love your neighbour", but until that maxim is applied to the concrete conditions of daily life, until accepted patterns of behaviour are revealed as without love, or until it is shown in reasonably specific terms what loving one's neighbour means, we are not dealing with prophecy. Conversely if an interest in social problems on the part of avowed Christians is not based on theology, but on secular philosophy their preaching is not prophetic either. Because the evangelicals in the West Indies, whether British in Jamaica or Canadian or East Indian in Trinidad derived their social thinking from secular sources rather than from the Bible they cannot be described as prophetic. When they did think biblically they were thinking about sin and salvation and the assorted problems of personal ethics. Theology and society were not combined. It follows therefore that King Sugar was not troubled by the prophets. When they were troublesome they were not prophetic; when they were prophetic they were not troublesome.

1. The first part of this paper is based on missionary biography, and, as it has turned out most of the missionaries who published autobiographies, or who had books written about them were from Jamaica. In the Presbyterian case, besides the autobiographies of George Blyth and Hope Waddell, I have gone through the correspondence published in the Scottish Missionary magazines.
2. See John Wesley, Thoughts on Slavery, and Thomas Clarkson, Essay.
3. Cited in J. Hinton, Memoir of William Knibb, London 1847, page 43
4. Philip Wright, Knibb the Notorious, London, 1973, pages 31-32.
5. G.C. Findlay and W.W. Holdsworth, The history of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, Vol II, London 1921, pages 79-80, 86 and following; Peter Duncan, A Narrative of the Wesleyan Mission to Jamaica, London 1849, pages 162-165; Mary Reckord, Missionary Activity in Jamaica Before Emancipation, unpublished PhD thesis, London 1964, page 13; Geoffrey Johnston, Documents Illustrative of the Presbyterian Church of Jamaica, typescript, United Theological College of the West Indies, Document 16; J.E. Hutton, A History of Moravian Missions, London, no date, pages 195-197
6. Henry Bleby, The Death Struggles of Slavery, London, 1853, pages 5-6; Hinton, op. cit., pages 118-119; George Blyth, Reminiscences of a Missionary Life, London 1854, pages 59-66; Hope Waddell, Twenty Nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa, London, 1863, pages 56-57.
7. Hinton, op. cit., pages 139-140. The Methodist response was similar, see Reckord, op. cit., page 348 and following.
8. H.B. Foster, The Rise and Progress of Wesleyan Methodism in Jamaica, London, 1881, page 98
9. Hinton, op. cit., page 314
10. Eric Williams, The History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago, London 1962, pages 106-109.
11. Sarah Morton, John Morton of Trinidad, Toronto 1916, page 146
12. Report of the Committee on Emigration from India to the Crown Colonies and Protectorates, Cd. 5194, 1910, pages 337-341.
13. The Presbyterian Witness, October 28th, 1911.
14. Correspondence Respecting the Recent Coolie Disturbances in Trinidad at the Mahurran Festival, with the Report Thereon, by Sir H.W. Norman, C 4366, March 1885, pages 68-69.
15. John Morton to Harvey Morton, February 27th, 1910, Morton Papers, Box 3
16. The Maritime Presbyterian, March 1885
17. "Statement by John Morton anent his resolution to the Agricultural Society," 1899, Morton Papers, Box 3; Labour Question in Trinidad, Report of a Special Committee appointed to consider matters related thereto, Council Paper, No 13 of 1906, Appendix A, page 70.

18. Notes on a Letter to the Witness, no date, late 1876, Morton Papers, Box 1; J. Morton, "Some Hindrances to the Reception of the Gospel on the Part of the Coolie", The Presbyterian Record, April 1877, and his speech to the General Assembly, 1900, The Record, July 1900.
19. Geoffrey Johnston, The Canadian Mission in Trinidad, 1868-1938, unpublished DTh thesis, Knox College, Toronto, 1977, page 264.