

Sir John Gladstone and the Debate over the Amelioration of Slavery in the British West Indies in the 1820s

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Abstract Sir John Gladstone made a fortune as a Demerara sugar-planter and a key supporter of the British policy of amelioration in which slavery would be “improved” by making it more “humane.” Unlike resident planters in the British West Indies, who were firmly opposed to any alteration to the conditions of enslavement, and unlike abolitionists, who saw amelioration as a step toward abolition, Gladstone was a rare but influential metropolitan-based planter with an expansive imperial vision, prepared to work with British politicians to guarantee his investments in slavery through progressive slave reforms. This article intersects with recent historiography highlighting connections between metropole and colony but also insists on the influence of Demerara, including the effects of a large slave rebellion centered on Gladstone’s estates (which illustrated that enslaved people were not happy with Gladstone’s supposedly enlightened attitudes) on metropolitan sensibilities in the 1820s. Gladstone’s strategies for an improved slavery, despite the contradictions inherent in championing such a policy while maintaining a fierce drive for profits, were a powerful counter to a renewed abolitionist thrust against slavery in the mid to late 1820s. Gladstone showed that the logic of gradual emancipation still had force in imperial thinking in this decade.

INTRODUCTION

After years of historiographical neglect, the topic of slavery amelioration has come back to attention. Historians of British West Indian slavery are less attracted now than they were to Eric Williams’s concept of a “decline thesis” in which the period between 1807 and 1833 was merely a pause in a long-term process whereby slavery came to an inevitable end, despite determined rearguard action by planters.¹ Instead, the period between the 1790s and the early 1830s has come to be seen as a crucial period in the history of the British Empire when notions of how imperial labor should be organized dovetailed with debates on the empire’s future. Just how would labor be organized in the nineteenth century? Would it be slave or free? Would slave gangs remain in the cane fields or be replaced by cheap paid labor on an Asian model?

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¹ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1944).

Abolitionists became more sophisticated in their arguments after the restart of agitation against slavery in 1823 and more adept in countering proslavery arguments, buoyed up by new statistical evidence about slave population decline.² The weakening value of some Caribbean commodities, the increasing dominance of Cuba and Brazil in the sugar trade and of America in cheap slave-grown cotton, and the groundswell of public opinion in favor of modernization and reform in all aspects of colonial government meant the period from the passing of the slave trade act in 1807 and the eventual end of slavery itself in 1833 was also important.³ Planters and their representatives had incentives to try to reform slavery to make it “improved” and “humane.” In this article, we examine the last stages of amelioration through the Demerara career of Sir John Gladstone, a powerful Liverpool merchant with massive West Indian slaveholdings and the father of the future prime minister William Ewart Gladstone. Despite the difficulties that British slaveholders encountered in the 1820s, Gladstone made a fortune in Demerara in the decade before emancipation. In the last ten years of British slavery, a few slave-owning planters like Gladstone, attuned to metropolitan thinking on the future of slavery in the British Empire, engaged in what was ultimately a rearguard action to fashion an ameliorated and reformed slavery that maintained the still-enormous profits generated by the plantation economy in the West Indies. It was, however, a rearguard action in retrospect only. We argue that in the 1820s, Gladstone’s strategies in Demerara had a chance of success, even and despite the setback to planter interests that occurred as a result of a large slave rebellion in 1823—a rebellion centered on Gladstone’s estates and led by his enslaved namesake, Jack Gladstone.

The debate over the amelioration of slave conditions in the 1820s involved more than reactionary planters determined to prevent any diminution in their power and idealistic abolitionists implacably opposed to everything that planters stood for. It also included imperial politicians who thought that slavery could be improved and preserved, as well as a small minority of farsighted planters with an expansive imperial vision, like Gladstone. But amelioration was divisive. Many planters, keen to protect their prerogative, were in favor of some change but at their own choosing. The concern was more about who would impose amelioration policy than over amelioration itself.

For his part, Gladstone was prepared to work with metropolitan authority in order to guarantee his large plantation investments through progressively minded slave reforms.⁴ While the abolition of much corporal punishment and access to better healthcare and housing for enslaved people were improvements, Gladstone’s belief in the necessity of coercion as a major underpinning of plantation agriculture did little to alleviate enslaved conditions. A principal complaint made by slaves made under the new regime was that they had to work harder for longer hours and they

² James Stephen, *England Enslaved by Her Own Slave Colonies* [...]. (London, 1826). For proslavery in the 1820s, see Paula E. Dumas, *Proslavery Britain: Fighting for Slavery in an Era of Abolition* (London, 2016).

³ For evangelical culture and antislavery after 1807, see Catherine Hall, *Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain* (New Haven, 2012), chap. 1. For revitalized slavery in the Atlantic world in the early nineteenth century, see Anthony Kaye, “The Second Slavery: Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century South and the Atlantic World,” *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (August 2009): 627–50.

⁴ Tony Ballantyne, “Humanitarian Narratives: Knowledge and the Politics of Mission and Empire,” *Social Sciences and Missions* 24, nos. 2–3 (2011): 233–64.

were more regulated than before.⁵ Moreover, Gladstone's aim of stamping out African culture among his workers by encouraging evangelicalism among them left them culturally bereft.

Gladstone was not alone. A number of planters were interested in treating West Indian slaves more humanely, notably in Barbados where Josiah Steele was a pioneer in slave amelioration in the late eighteenth century.⁶ Gladstone was in the mold of Steele, who thought that improving slave conditions made slavery more durable and more defensible to a suspicious metropolitan audience. At the same time, Gladstone's promotion of amelioration was intended to make empire more efficient and prosperous by making the management of slavery more scientific and more attuned to contemporary ideas of both moral and economic improvement.⁷ His political maneuverings during the 1820s reflect his belief that improvement offered a powerful third way that supported the continuation of a reformed form of slavery. This article thus intersects with a recent historiography that highlights the connections between metropole and colony but also insists on the influence of Demerara and the new sugar frontier more generally on metropolitan sensibilities in the 1820s and on visions of the future of empire.⁸

The strategies advanced by Gladstone were more disruptive to a renewed abolitionist thrust against slavery in the British Empire in the 1820s than has been previously recognized. By the time of the Demerara rebellion of 1823, the future of British West Indian slavery was still an open question: a reformed slavery was theoretically and practically possible, contrary to what many abolitionists thought. We recognize, of course, the limitations in making a case based on the social politics of one man; Gladstone was just a single cog in the ameliorative process. Yet as a planter/merchant, he was extremely active and well connected. With a wealth of experience in business, he became a slavery theorist, as early as 1807 publishing letters under the pseudonym of "Mercator" with an argument that predicted the end of slavery.⁹ His formidable influence stands out as a pre-eminent voice for slavery's improvement. It shows that notions of a reformed slavery were not illusory fantasies but a realistic possibility in the protean politics of slavery and antislavery in the British Empire of the 1820s.

⁵ Trevor Burnard, "A Voice for Slaves: The Office of the Fiscal in Berbice and the Beginnings of Protection in the British Empire," *Pacific Historical Review* 87, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 30–53.

⁶ David Lambert, *White Creole Culture: Politics and Identity in the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge, 2005), chap. 2.

⁷ Gladstone was the heir of "progressive" planters in the eighteenth-century West Indies who wished to implant new ideas of agricultural improvement onto their plantations. Justin Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment in the British Atlantic, 1750–1807* (New York, 2013).

⁸ Christer Petley, "New Perspectives on Slavery and Emancipation in the British Caribbean," *The Historical Journal* 54, no. 3 (September 2011): 855–80; and Nicholas Draper, *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-Ownership, Compensation and British Society at the End of Slavery* (Cambridge, 2010).

⁹ John Gladstone [Mercator, pseud.], *Letters Concerning the Abolition of the Slave-Trade and other West-India Affairs, by Mercator* (London, 1807).

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AMELIORATION

Historians adopt three positions about the amelioration of slavery in the British West Indies.¹⁰ J. R. Ward, in an important but dated survey, argued that amelioration was largely a success, at least judged on its own terms. He noted that slave productivity rates increased from the 1780s and that many West Indian planters, notably in the newly developed areas in the southern Caribbean, showed a serious concern for innovation, bringing about significantly improved nutrition and health, although punishment rates for slaves remained high.¹¹ Christa Dierksheide argues, conversely, that while amelioration might have proven successful if more West Indian planters had been like Gladstone and had adopted the reforms that he favored, most slave owners successfully resisted the implementation of amelioration schemes, forcing the government to take stronger measures and eventually leading to emancipation instead of reform. She argues that amelioration ended up being a failure, both for recalcitrant planters and for the British government. The efforts of planters like Gladstone to transform the master-slave relationship so that slavery became a source of social improvement as well as an area of increased productivity were undercut by people on the ground; one of these was Gladstone's manager in the early 1820s, Frederick Cort, who resisted implementing the ameliorative measures Gladstone demanded.

Dierksheide insists that if Gladstone's vision had prevailed, abolitionists' desire to end slavery would have been more difficult. Gladstone's progressive views on how slavery could be maintained but improved struck a chord with government officials worried about the possibility of revolutionary changes to the existing social order. His common-sense approach to mediating between antislavery concerns and plantation imperatives aligned with the realities Britons saw in a rapidly changing nineteenth-century world—a world in which it was best to deploy pragmatic rather than idealistic solutions. Gladstone's rational arguments in favor of planter-led abolitionism appealed to Tory and antislavery MPs alike, suggesting to conservatives that the more wide-eyed abolitionist plans for emancipation were untried “experiments.”¹²

As Dierksheide argues, Gladstone had an expansive and imperial view of the world, more so than most abolitionists, who were heavily focused on national models of reform rather than empire-wide solutions. He was certainly worldlier than most resident planters, who were concerned with maintaining the status quo and insisting on their sovereign right to govern themselves. Gladstone, by contrast, was attuned to developments in the empire as a whole. He fitted Christopher Bayly's

¹⁰ J. R. Ward, *British West Indian Slavery, 1750–1834: The Process of Amelioration* (Oxford, 1988); Mary Turner, “Planter Profits and Slave Rewards: Amelioration Reconsidered,” in *West Indies Accounts: Essays on the History of the British Caribbean and the Atlantic Economy in Honour of Richard Sheridan*, ed. Roderick A. McDonald (Kingston, 1996): 232–52; Alvin O. Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants: Crown Slaves in Berbice, Guyana, 1803–1831* (Kingston, 2002), 36–44; Christa Dierksheide, *Amelioration and Empire: Progress and Slavery in the Plantation Americas* (Charlottesville, 2014); and Caroline Quarrier Spence, “Ameliorating Empire: Slavery and Protection in the British Colonies, 1783–1865” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2014). J. R. Ward has revisited amelioration in Ward, “The Amelioration of British West Indian Slavery: Anthropometric Evidence,” *Economic Historical Review*, 11 January 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1111/chr.12655>.

¹¹ Ward, *British West Indian Slavery*, 7, 144, 208, 235.

¹² Dierksheide, *Amelioration and Empire*, chap. 6.

model of early nineteenth-century imperialists as outward-looking “constructive conservatives,” determined to implement by metropolitan fiat measures of social reform that bypassed the stridency and obdurate opposition of self-interested colonial legislatures. In this philosophy of state power, strategic and political aims were expressed in imperial expansion.¹³ If Gladstone had a model to aspire to, it was already under way in Britain in the transformations of labor relations in working-class life in the growing towns of northwest England. Thousands of workers were also moving to regulated factory work right on Gladstone’s doorstep in southern Lancashire and elsewhere in places where new regimes of clockwork and labor were being managed and tested by the early pioneers of the Industrial Revolution.¹⁴ Gladstone was part of this debate over English working class conditions as he endeavored, with more than a nod to evangelical zeal, to instill commensurately the same rigorous management on his plantations.

Caroline Quarrier Spence contests Ward’s and Dierksheide’s arguments. She believes that there were two phases of amelioration, the first of which, between the 1790s and 1823, was planter led, and a second phase, from 1823 to 1833, dominated by abolitionists who saw amelioration not as a genuine means of improving an institution but as part of a program to abolish slavery altogether.¹⁵ She argues that after 1823, when the Anti-Slavery Society re-emerged as a force in British politics, the supporters of amelioration expected that their advocacy of stronger regulations around slavery would eventually make slavery wither away. The leading British abolitionist, Thomas Fowell Buxton, made abolitionists’ intentions clear in 1823 when he called for the gradual abolition of slavery by an act of Parliament declaring all slaves born after a certain date to be free. Even politicians not especially sympathetic to antislavery often supported the idea that amelioration would lead to freedom. George Canning, for example, supported amelioration because “gradual measures producing gradual improvement” would eventually lead to a state where “not only may the individual be set free, but his very status may be ultimately abolished.”¹⁶

We see, however, the debate over slavery and its future to be wider than arguments over the nature of bonded labor. This debate was part of a larger conversation over the shape of British imperialism and the future of the empire and only in part a conversation about slavery. Framing the debate wholly in abolitionist terms, or even in terms of the “amelioration of slavery,” removes the important context in which Gladstone and his ideas over labor were circulating. Competing ideas about amelioration and its ultimate aim were also running in tandem. Buxton too, for example, saw amelioration as an important step and could agree with Gladstone on most points—but for Buxton the end would be abolition, whereas Gladstone, in fighting for slavery’s amelioration, fought for its preservation. Gladstone was not deluded in believing that slavery could be not only preserved but be improved, made more

¹³ Christopher Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London, 1989), 11; Anna Gambles, *Protection and Politics: Conservative Economic Discourse, 1815–1852* (Woodbridge, 1999), 150.

¹⁴ E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and Present* 38, no. 1 (December 1967): 56–97.

¹⁵ Spence, “Ameliorating Empire,” 305–6.

¹⁶ George Canning, Speech to the House of Commons, 16 March 1824, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 2nd series, vol. 10 (1820–30), col. 1095.

profitable and attuned to modern methods of management. Anti-slavers liked to paint slavery as antithetical to modernity, but the reality of slavery as a profitable and capitalist form of economic organization in places like the United States, and the fact that American planters were in the mainstream of capitalist development in the early nineteenth century, attested to Gladstone being representative of larger trends among slave owners.¹⁷

Gladstone's high standing among contemporary Tory politicians and his ability to influence their policies on slavery in the 1820s came in part because he demonstrated expertise in West Indian affairs in ways that were useful to British statesmen. He was also in tune with his fellow Tories in his religious, economic, and racial views. For a start, he was a devout evangelical at a time when this group had a disproportionate influence in the higher reaches of Tory governance. Many evangelicals, of course, were fervent antislavers, but many moderate evangelicals like Gladstone and his friend George Canning were more inclined to proslavery beliefs. Their moderate evangelicalism gave moral legitimacy to a political system designed to prevent revolution of all kinds and to rationalize and defend the existing order.¹⁸

Key to Gladstone's political ideology was the concept of protection—one that he adopted in regard to contemporary politics and also (defining "protection" in a different sense than an opposition to the ideology of free trade) in the proper relation he thought should exist among the state, masters, and slaves. As Anna Gambles has shown, protectionism was an integral feature of Tory economic discourse in the 1820s and was seen as a principal way in which stable social order could be sustained in a period of bewildering change and highly ideological support of free-trade doctrines. Tories were determined to prioritize "national interests" over all else and believed that these interests arose out of particular historical circumstances. These interests could only be maintained through such things as preference, navigation laws, the Corn Laws, and sugar duties, devices that consolidated the political cohesion of its empire. Thus, preferential treatment of West Indian sugar was justified as a legislative mechanism that could shore up the stability of the British economy.¹⁹

As this explanation of protectionism suggests, the idea of protection was intensely concerned with empire. Indeed, Michael Taylor has shown that the imperial aspect of Tory economic discourse in the 1820s "evolved primarily as the intellectual response of the West India lobby to the Antislavery Society's campaign for the emancipation of British colonial slaves." In short, the rebirth of an assertive antislavery movement from 1823, which validated their claims through rational scientific arguments going beyond moral and political rhetoric into the new discipline of political economy, fed into "conservative economics." Defenders of West Indian slavery like Gladstone attacked the very principles of free-trade ideology as a means of ensuring that plans for emancipation—described as a moral and economic disaster for Britain's still valuable plantation economies in the Caribbean—were defeated. Taylor looks at

¹⁷ Among a vast literature on American slave owners as effective capitalists, see Richard Follett, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820–1860* (Baton Rouge, 2005).

¹⁸ Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford, 1988), 204, 219, 377. For the origins of Anglican evangelical influence on British politics, see John Torrance, "Social Class and Bureaucratic Innovation: The Commissioners for Examining the Public Accounts 1780–1787," *Past and Present* 78, no. 1 (February 1978): 56–81.

¹⁹ Gambles, *Protection and Politics*, 19–21, 149.

the arguments of West Indian defenders of proslavery in order to appreciate the imperial roots of conservative protectionist ideology in the 1820s, but he speculates that realizing that many advocates of this ideology were proslavery advocates may also affect histories of British slavery. In studying Gladstone's sophisticated and influential advocacy of economic and racial protection, we can see why amelioration furthered a principal political objective of the imperial mind during what C. A. Bayly memorably called the "imperial meridian." That objective was to implement gradual change while keeping the status quo largely intact, thus avoiding what was thought to be the disaster of the ill-thought experiment of emancipation without amelioration that occurred in the French West Indian Empire during the French and Haitian revolutions of the 1790s.²⁰

Gladstone also believed in protection as a moral imperative within the politics of empire. Britain had a duty to intervene to protect its subjects, providing them with shelter from harm and a means, however hazy and distant, to partake of the benefits of imperial civilization until such time as even endangered groups became civilizable. As Lisa Ford argues, the logic of imperial intervention into slavery was simple. If masters had complete authority over slaves, then both were out of the purview of the state. Moreover, government became corrupted when it was controlled by such masters, who would do little to stop all but the most egregious oppression of enslaved people in the name of upholding slaveholder privileges. All evidence from the West Indian and North American past suggested that colonists would never protect vulnerable people, including slaves, meaning that the task of protection had to be transferred to such people as sympathetic statesmen and progressive imperialists like Gladstone. Gladstone's support of amelioration as a form of protection for enslaved people rested on the assumption that in order to achieve moral and physical improvement of slaves while maintaining the profitability and imperial advantages of the plantation system, control over slaves' conditions had to be transferred from the periphery to the center in the form of supervised acts of jurisdiction, especially slave protection legislation.²¹

Many, though not all, West Indian planters thought that they saw through the pretensions of those metropolitan supporters of amelioration who shared Gladstone's belief that the adopting of such measures would extend the length of time that slavery existed. They thought that Gladstone was deceiving himself by believing that treating slaves better would either stop abolitionists from moving toward an ultimate objective of emancipation or that through ameliorative measures enslaved persons would become contented, dutiful, and hard-working field laborers. They adopted a policy of resistance to amelioration through constant delaying tactics and legislative and private obstruction. In Demerara, resident planters succeeded in preventing amelioration laws being passed. In neighboring Berbice, such laws were eventually passed only after the colonial secretary, Lord Bathurst, lost patience with the governor and his council, replacing the council with new members who

²⁰ James MacQueen, *The West India Colonies* [...]. (London, 1824), 1–6; David Lambert, "The 'Glasgow King of Billingsgate': James MacQueen and an Atlantic Proslavery Network," *Slavery and Abolition* 29, no. 3 (2008): 389–413.

²¹ Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford, *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800–1850* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 85–116.

were given an ultimatum either to pass a satisfactory slave law ordinance or to have a proclamation enforce the amelioration laws upon them.²²

THE IMPERIAL DEBATE

Even after Bathurst's ameliorative vision was partially implemented, local authorities and individual planters found many opportunities to sidestep and evade the regulations. Slave complaints were constantly ignored and left unresolved, as the records of the Protectors of Slaves reveal.²³ As Spence argues, resident planters were "afraid that by giving an inch, they would be forced to capitulate to the entire abolitionist agenda." The lesson they had learned from previous planter-led efforts at amelioration in the 1790s was that their concessions did not stave off abolitionist attacks. This time, planters would be obdurate in defense of the status quo and would undermine the "confident expectation" of the House of Commons when it initiated amelioration policies in 1823 that this was a "friendly warning" for planters to change their ways or face the consequences.²⁴

The 1823 rebellion polarized the debate over slave amelioration in Britain and set the planters on a collision course with an increasingly powerful missionary movement supported by abolitionists flexing their political influence. Planters justified their increased obstinacy in the mid-1820s by pointing out how Gladstone's leniency led to the rebellion of 1823 starting on his estate. His manager, Frederick Cort, made it clear that he blamed Gladstone's advocacy of ameliorative policies as a principal cause of the rebellion. In following Gladstone's orders on amelioration, he said, he and Gladstone had gained a reputation for weakness. The "impression in the public mind," he told Gladstone, was "that you stood remarkable for favoring the Missionary system, and that by your influence and encouragement [the rebellion] had been greatly helped."²⁵

Gladstone found himself the target of resident planters' bile. He lamented resentfully "that such unworthy feelings should be found in the colonies against me, such belong to the worst part of human nature,"²⁶ and deplored the rhetoric of the Demerara planters as being full of "violent spirit" and "irritating language."²⁷ And he was not alone in believing that Christianity, amelioration, and a reformed slavery went together. Archibald Browne of the Scots Church in Georgetown in Demerara published three discourses in 1824 shortly after the Demerara rebellion, arguing the case for a proslavery Christianity that was both missionary and ameliorationist.²⁸

²² Neville Thompson, *Earl Bathurst and the British Empire, 1762–1834* (Leeds, 1999), 177.

²³ The protector of slaves in Berbice was a newly created office, after 1826 replacing the fiscal as someone who heard enslaved people's complaints and had responsibility for ensuring laws on slave amelioration were kept. See Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 29; Randy Browne and Trevor Burnard, "Husbands and Fathers: The Family Experience of Enslaved Men in Berbice," *New West Indian Guide* 91, nos. 3–4 (2017): 193–222.

²⁴ Spence, "Ameliorating Empire," 240–41.

²⁵ Cort to Gladstone, 22 April 1824, Gladstone–Glynne Correspondence, Flintshire Record Office, UK (hereafter GG).

²⁶ Gladstone to Cort, 8 July 1824, GG.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Archibald Browne, *Three Discourses: The First, on the Duty of Subjects to Their Sovereign and the Government under which They Live: the Two Last on the Duty of Slaves in Reference to Their Present Condition and Their Respective Masters* [...]. (London, 1824).

Resentful resident planters might have thought harder before taking umbrage at Gladstone as a naïve tool of abolitionists. There was logic behind his dislike of the harshly punitive measures planters took against rebels. Resident planters reacted to the rebellion with martial law and exemplary executions. They refused to contemplate any further changes in their behavior toward slaves, arguing that if any quarter was shown, another rebellion would break out.²⁹ Gladstone, closely connected with the leading politicians in Britain sympathetic to Demerara planters, men like William Huskisson and George Canning, realized that when news of Demerara planters' obstinacy arrived in Britain, it would damage further their already poor image and lose them what few friends they had in the British government. While the West India lobby was still large, it was becoming weaker and more divided. Gladstone believed that the rebellion would bolster the abolitionist view that West Indian planters were so transformed by their exposure to tropical heat that they could not but help act as cruel oriental despots.³⁰

Gladstone had a great deal at stake in making these arguments. The government ministers who promoted amelioration were not the abolitionist ideologues who brought amelioration bills to the House of Commons. Gladstone knew the differences in metropolitan attitudes toward amelioration, even if resident planters did not. Huskisson, for example, had written to him about Buxton's 1823 bill that "the government did everything in its power to prevent Buxton's motion altogether and that Mr. Canning in particular exerted all his personal influence with Mr. Wilberforce and others for that purpose."³¹ Gladstone did his best to minimize the damage to Demerara interests after 1823 by meeting Canning and other Tory ministers, including Bathurst, to transform Buxton's proposals into resolutions that did not include any suggestion that amelioration would lead to emancipation. Gladstone proposed appeasement rather than acquiescence in his dealings with Whig abolitionist MPs.³²

Lord Bathurst was difficult to persuade, because he was not partial to West Indian planters and had an aversion to slavery. He declared in March 1824, when petitions against slavery were presented to the House of Lords, that he felt "in common with every man the miseries and evils of slavery." But he had no intention of ending slavery without the planters' consent and without giving them large compensation for their losses. He also believed that conditions for slaves would only improve by "progressive measures of amelioration, by religious instruction, and a mitigation of the evils of slavery." Abolitionists' determination to stick to their extreme positions, he maintained, caused problems "as they but too generally tended to create in the mind of the owner an extravagance of fright, and in the slave an insubordination, both of which were in the end most pernicious to the security of the one, and to the improvement of the other."³³

²⁹ Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York, 1994), 232.

³⁰ Dierksheide, *Amelioration and Empire*, 189; Christer Petley, "Gluttony, Excess and the Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean," *Atlantic Studies* 9, no. 1 (January 2012): 85–106.

³¹ Huskisson to Gladstone, 2 November 1823, GG.

³² S. G. Checkland, *The Gladstones: A Family Biography, 1764–1851* (Cambridge, 1971), 186.

³³ Thompson, *Earl Bathurst and the British Empire*, 173–76.

As Gladstone quickly discerned, Bathurst favored gradual emancipation, over the long term. He modified Buxton's proposals so that only enslaved women were made free after a certain date and after doing a period of apprenticeship work, which would repay the cost of raising them. That apprenticeship period would be long rather than short, probably amounting to ten years in virtual enslavement. Through these measures, Bathurst thought, slavery would end "progressively and almost imperceptibly at some definite and distant period." Slaves must first be civilized before they could be freed, and given what appeared to be natural constraints preventing their becoming so, it was unlikely that they could be freed in any large numbers. Ameliorative measures, in his opinion, "cannot fail to effect such a progressive change in the general character and habits of the slave population that when the distant period shall arrive the transition from slavery to freedom will be finally accomplished without revulsion or danger."³⁴

Bathurst's emphasis here was not on "freedom" but on "distant." As no one thought that Africans would easily become ready for freedom, the date of freedom could be endlessly postponed. Bathurst's views were very similar to Gladstone's views about "precipitate emancipators." Both men were prepared to believe that slaves could conceivably be prepared for freedom, which put them at odds with most planters, who felt that the "negro character" was incapable of improvement.³⁵ And Gladstone was prepared to compare West Indian slaves favorably with the British working class, the Irish poor, and the peasantry of India. But he also found it impossible to conceive of any situation when the basic principle behind amelioration—making enslaved persons suitable for freedom through education, religious instruction, and the cultivation of British rules of marital and familial morality—could be achieved. As he told a fellow merchant, without slavery to order their behavior, his slaves, once freed, would be "idle, insolent, slothful and averse to outdoor work."³⁶

THE CROPPER DEBATE

Given his belief that an improved form of slavery could preserve the institution for the benefit of planters, slaves, and empire, how did John Gladstone understand the institution of chattel slavery that undergirded his increasingly large fortune in Demerara? We can see the expression of his views on slavery best in a notorious correspondence played out in his local newspaper between him and a former friend and colleague, the Liverpool merchant James Cropper. Beginning in October 1823, Gladstone engaged with Cropper, a man who had made a great deal of money in

³⁴ Ibid.; Andrew Porter, "Commerce and Christianity": The Rise and Fall of a Nineteenth-Century Missionary Slogan," *History Workshop Journal* 28, no. 3 (September 1985): 597–621; Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (London, 2002); and Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853* (Montreal, 2002).

³⁵ Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore, 1992), pt. 1.

³⁶ John Gladstone and James Cropper, *The Correspondence between John Gladstone, Esq., M.P. and James Cropper, Esq., on the Present State of Slavery in the British West Indies and in the United States of America* [...]. (Liverpool, 1824), 17.

trade with India and in American cotton, in an exchange of increasingly bitter letters in the *Liverpool Mercury*.³⁷ Their dialogue centered on the state of slavery in the West Indies and on the contested issue of whether slave-grown produce was in fact cheaper than free wage labor.³⁸ From Cropper's side, it was, however, a broad-ranging attack on the institution that formed the basis of Gladstone's wealth, an attack made more powerful by coming from a man of business. Cropper had been prominent in anti-slavery circles for some years and with the foundation of the Anti-Slavery Society earlier in 1823, he and other abolitionists renewed their attacks on the system of slavery in the Caribbean.³⁹

Cropper's opening salvo in the debate on 31 October 1823, titled "The Impolicy of Slavery," greatly angered Gladstone. Cropper began with an evocation of the "cruelty and injustice of Negro slavery," the misery it occasioned, and the "devastation" it spread "over the face of the earth." Slaves, Cropper argued, were "inhumanely driven like cattle" and "held and dealt with as property and often branded as such by a hot iron." Exposed to the caprice of their owner, and frequently having to undergo the pain of separation from families, they were "compelled to work on the Sabbath ... forbidden to marry," and were left vulnerable to "unrestrained licentiousness." Moreover, slaves were forbidden to own property, and any laws "for their protection" were "but a mockery." Worse was the debauchery of the whites, which also led the slaves into depravity.⁴⁰

Cropper further argued that the iniquities of the slave system would be clearer if the West India Trade were not so "supported and protected by bounties and prohibitions." He named three bounties he wanted ended: that paid on the exportation of refined sugar from the West Indies, the concomitant import tax paid by East India traders for sugar, and the tax levied on all non-West Indian sources of sugar coming into Britain. Through these bounties the British government unnaturally protected slave-grown produce and therefore slavery itself. Cropper returned to the fundamental argument about free wage labor that had been first raised over the acquisition of Trinidad in 1797.⁴¹ He believed that in order to stamp out slavery and slave-grown products, the system had to be exposed to international markets within an atmosphere of free trade. Doing so would underscore the inherent unprofitability of the West Indies and would stimulate other markets, especially Cropper's principal concern: India.⁴²

The opening up to private traders of commerce with India, which until 1813 had been exclusively part of the monopoly of the East India Company, made Cropper's

³⁷ David Brion Davis, "James Cropper and the British Anti-Slavery Movement, 1821–1823," *Journal of Negro History* 45, no. 4 (October 1960): 241–58; Davis, "James Cropper and the Anti-Slavery Movement, 1823–33," *Journal of Negro History* 46, no. 3 (July 1961): 134–73.

³⁸ Gladstone and Cropper, *Correspondence*, 11.

³⁹ Davis, "James Cropper and the Anti-Slavery Movement," 160–61. Another important debate initiated by a proslavery West Indian was over Sierra Leone as a failed economic experiment. David Lambert, "Sierra Leone and Other Sites in the War of Representation over Slavery," *History Workshop Journal* 64, no. 1 (Autumn 2007): 103–32.

⁴⁰ Gladstone and Cropper, *Correspondence*, 2.

⁴¹ Patrick C. Lipscomb, "Party Politics, 1801–1802: George Canning and the Trinidad Question," *Historical Journal* 12, no. 3 (September 1969): 442–66.

⁴² Gladstone and Cropper, *Correspondence*, 11.

argument more persuasive.⁴³ He claimed that Bengali workers on low wages could out-produce the West Indies if given a chance.⁴⁴ He then extended this argument to cover what he knew best: the “American Trade” in cotton. In America, he said, the North had done away with slavery because of the productivity of free labor, while the South remained locked in a cycle of uncompetitive production similar to that of the British West Indies, leading to economic underperformance as well as the perpetuation and expansion of slavery. Even so, he thought the state of slavery in the United States was better than in the British West Indies. In the United States, enslaved people, through the benefit of climate and good treatment, had managed to repopulate themselves, whereas in the West Indies the system was so amiss that many thousands of lives were lost, showing slavery to be a system of oppression, wickedness, “impolicy,” and folly “almost incredible in this enlightened age.”⁴⁵

Pointedly, Cropper noted that enslaved people on Gladstone’s estates did not enjoy natural population increase. Gladstone, like most West Indian planters, was sensitive to accusations that the evils of West Indian planters could be seen in the demography of slavery, because population decline was widespread in the British Caribbean in the early nineteenth century. Barry Higman shows that fifteen of twenty island colonies experienced a decline in slave population between 1807 and 1823. Demerara was among the worst demographic performers. Despite slave imports from neighboring colonies, the slave population declined between 1807 and 1834 by 21 percent. Neighboring Barbice, which had less slave importation, is a better guide to population decline, having a reduction in its slave population of 32 percent in this period and of 12 percent between just 1819 and 1828.⁴⁶ Abolitionists had concentrated on reproductive politics—why slaves failed to reproduce and why slave populations failed to thrive—in the years after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807.⁴⁷ As Seymour Drescher notes, abolitionists moved the terms of debate from “production to reproduction and from economics to demography” so that the attention was on West Indian failure rather than on their sizable economic contribution to British coffers.⁴⁸

In 1813, the House of Commons instituted a slave registry system in Trinidad, extending it to St. Lucia in 1814 and to other colonies in 1816 and 1817. The system was a comprehensive survey of slave demography in the British West Indies and showed that slave populations in sugar-growing slave societies, except for Barbados, were in demographic decline.⁴⁹ These findings supported the

⁴³ H. V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756–1833* (Cambridge, 2005), 253.

⁴⁴ Gladstone and Cropper, *Correspondence*, 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁶ B. W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834* (Baltimore, 1984), 76, 415.

⁴⁷ Katherine Paugh, *The Politics of Reproduction: Race, Medicine, and Fertility in the Age of Abolition* (Oxford, 2017); B. W. Higman, “Slavery and the Development of Demographic Theory in the Age of Industrial Revolution,” in *Slavery and British Society, 1776–1846*, ed. James Walvin (Baton Rouge, 1982), 164–94.

⁴⁸ Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (Oxford, 2002), 35–36.

⁴⁹ For the demographic destructiveness of sugar regimes, see Michael Tadman, “The Demographic Cost of Sugar: Debates on Slave Societies and Natural Increase in the Americas,” *American Historical Review* 105, no. 5 (December 2000): 1534–75.

arguments of abolitionists who had marshaled available statistics to argue that it was not just immoral but economically inefficient for planters not to focus their energies on breeding slaves rather than accepting an annual decline in slave numbers. William Dickson, for example, calculated as early as 1813 that the relative returns on capital from buying labor as against rearing slave children to adulthood were very low. For a planter to recoup an investment in a bought slave, that slave needed to work longer than a slave's average life expectancy. By contrast, Dickson argued, if a planter spent £9 on making a woman's pregnancy trouble free (by taking her out of the field for three months and allowing her to nurse her infant for two years), by the time that infant was fifteen the child would have earned its owner at least £35. Therefore planters who failed to keep up slave numbers by encouraging births were both cruel and financially irresponsible.⁵⁰

Cropper's arguments angered Gladstone. For over ten years he had paid close attention to the management of his Demerara estates. He believed himself to be an enlightened, modernizing planter who cared about the treatment of his workers while being interested in promoting efficiency in agricultural production and advancing new methods of increasing yields.⁵¹ His personal view, however, stands in stark contrast to the reality of life on his plantations. The fundamental fact was that he strengthened slavery rather than weakened it. He confused the new mill-town industrialism he encountered in Liverpool with chattel labor, even though the conditions of slavery in Demerara were not really comparable to even the worst industrial circumstances. That said, his success as a plantation owner was due to his ability to make economies of scale work to improve productivity. He was the model of a modern plantation owner, using methods devised in Britain to transform plantation agriculture in the Caribbean. As the owner of many estates and with deep reserves of capital, he was able to acquire estates for good prices and use his multiple ownership of estates to move slaves around for maximum effectiveness. He supplied shops on each estate and used his own ships to send produce to Britain. Moreover, he paid attention to improving the quality of his sugar, treating his many estates as a single enterprise and knowing intimately the markets where he sold his produce. He ploughed some of his large profits into improving machinery on his plantations and built canals to ease transport problems. He was not afraid to delegate responsibility, even if, as with Cort, his confidence in his managers' abilities was misplaced. Even with the deleterious Cort, Gladstone's rearrangement of his plantations increased profits markedly.

By general agreement, Gladstone got the better of the argument with Cropper. As David Brion Davis states, "Compared with Cropper's pedestrian logic and bare statistics, Gladstone's prose sparkled with wit and mockery, and he had a manifest advantage in taking the firm ground of a worldly man of shrewd common sense."⁵² To some extent, this historical judgment comes as a surprise. Cropper made some telling ad hominem points against his adversary, notably that Gladstone was responsible for a major slave insurrection and also that the demography of slavery on Demerara, even on estates such as Gladstone's adopting ameliorative

⁵⁰ William Dickson, *Mitigation of Slavery, in Two Parts* (London, 1814), 193, 248.

⁵¹ Gladstone to Cort, 25 August 1823, GG.

⁵² Davis, "James Cropper and the British Anti-Slavery Movement," 258.

measures, was appalling.⁵³ Large annual declines in slave population showed, Cropper argued, that West Indian slavery was wicked. Finally, the highly personal and increasingly acrimonious nature of the correspondence worked in Cropper's favor. Gladstone found it impossible to control his feelings, to stick to rational debate, and to stop responding at length to tangential issues that he thought impugned his honesty or misrepresented his position.⁵⁴

Where Gladstone proved superior to Cropper, however, was in his awareness of the political ramifications of his argument. The Tory government of the post-Waterloo period was notoriously wary about the lure of free-trade arguments and determined to prevent the merest hint of social unrest. Moreover, ministers were sympathetic to protectionist positions that connected to long-standing mercantilist assumptions. At bottom, therefore, the two men were arguing over economic theory. Cropper was a devotee of Adam Smith. For Cropper, reading Smith was a revelation, as it "provided a nearly cosmic justification for business enterprise and reconciled duty with profit."⁵⁵ He advanced Smithian ideas with missionary zeal, as offended by the artificial bounties that he believed privileged West Indian sugar over sugar from India as by the immorality of West Indian slavery. Slavery, Cropper maintained, was an archaic institution bound to die out soon if not kept artificially alive through generous government subsidies. Just abolish slavery, let free trade rule, and then, Cropper believed, the law of the market would allow India to produce as much sugar as Britain required. Following neoclassical economic theory, he argued that supply would immediately respond to demand once prices were allowed to seek their natural level.⁵⁶

Gladstone, conservative by nature though moderate and centrist in his politics, was more pessimistic than Cropper about how the market worked. He saw the demand for sugar in Britain as limited and believed that if duties on foreign and Indian sugar were removed, all that would happen would be a collapse in prices, a destruction of the prosperous West Indian economy, and the end of Britain's only certain supply of sugar. It would not be sugar from India but sugar from Brazil and Cuba that would fill the gap in provision arising from what he considered would be a self-inflicted injury. This injury would be derived from following impractical economic theories so as to ruin the West Indies and harm the living standards of enslaved laborers. He argued that free labor and free trade were untried experiments and that what Cropper proposed would necessitate entanglements with the "market," an economic concept Gladstone found unpredictable and dangerous when unregulated through custom and practice. His arguments were thus pragmatic rather than theoretical and, most important, decidedly non-revolutionary and incremental in nature. He asked why Britain needed to move away from protecting West Indian sugar through preferential duties when such policies were of long-standing practice and beneficial to the growth of the empire.⁵⁷

⁵³ Richard B. Sheridan, "The Condition of the Slaves on the Sugar Plantations of Sir John Gladstone in the Colony of Demerara, 1812–49," *New West Indian Guide* 76, nos. 2–3 (2002): 243–69.

⁵⁴ Checkland, *Gladstones*, 191–92.

⁵⁵ Davis, "James Cropper and the British Anti-Slavery Movement," 244.

⁵⁶ Gladstone and Cropper, *Correspondence*, 17.

⁵⁷ Dierksheide, *Amelioration and Empire*, 207.

Gladstone's cautious conservatism chimed more closely with the mood of Britain's leaders than Cropper's radical free-trade position. Gladstone's experience as a leading Liverpool merchant gave him credibility among politicians inclined to make economic policy coincide with national advantage; he had been involved in the largely successful attempt in the 1810s to break the East India company monopoly in India, and he had taken a patriotic stance during the War of 1812, advocating that Britain stop buying American cotton while the war lasted and instead turn to India for supplies.⁵⁸ In addition, the policies he favored on the amelioration of slavery were developmentalist in nature and conservative rather than radical in doctrine, intended to be advanced as a means to contain the instability caused by "progress."⁵⁹ Such an approach was highly attractive to politicians who were greatly concerned with the threat of social disorder in a period of rapid and often disconcerting change as Britain adjusted to the effects of industrialization, rapid urban migration, poverty, and unemployment. Gladstone's position appealed especially to High Tories like Lord Bathurst. Bathurst believed in an activist and interventionist government more than in the Smithian workings of the invisible hand and in market freedom. Government intervention was needed so that change could be moderated and the nation protected against the wilder excesses of political economists. If this meant pandering to monopolists and preferentialists, it was better than venturing into unknown waters following untested economic theories. The key word here was "protection." It was not an accident that the system of economic organization Bathurst favored had the same name as that given to the people appointed in the mid-1820s to oversee the implementation of amelioration in colonies like Demerara and Berbice. High Tories favored protection as both a social and a political strategy. The Duke of Wellington, for example, described himself as the nation's "protector against the political economists."⁶⁰

Gladstone especially needed to impress Bathurst, secretary of state for war and the colonies and not a man especially predisposed to the West India planter interest—unlike Gladstone's political friends, William Huskisson and Robert Wilmot-Horton. At the end of his long tenure as secretary of state between 1812 and 1827, Bathurst pressed forward with plans for amelioration in the face of fierce resistance from West Indian planters and their supporters, proving more willing to promote amelioration than his successor between 1828 and 1830, Sir George Murray. This persistence led the abolitionist James Stephen to admit in 1831 that his boss was sincere in his efforts to get slave laws passed in the colony. Yet Bathurst was no natural reformer: he was strongly protectionist, was opposed to Catholic emancipation, and was temperamentally skeptical of change, though willing to adapt to new circumstances rather than offering just rigid resistance to reform.

Gladstone convinced Bathurst that amelioration could succeed as long as the wilder arguments of people like Cropper were ignored. Like Gladstone, Bathurst thought that the evils of slavery could only be remedied by "progressive measures of amelioration [and] by religious instruction" and that such measures would be impeded by "loud and angry discussions" that "too generally tended to create in

⁵⁸ John Gladstone, *Letters Addressed to [...] the Earl of Clancarty [...] on the Inexpediency of permitting the Importation of Cotton Wool from the United States during the Present War* (London, 1813).

⁵⁹ M. P. Cowen and R. W. Shenton, *Doctrines of Development* (London, 1996), 4.

⁶⁰ Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People? England, 1783–1846* (Oxford, 2006), 307, 315.

the mind of the owner an extravagance of fright, and in the slave an insubordination, both of which were in the end pernicious to the security of the one, and to the improvement of the other.”⁶¹

The influential view of William Wilberforce about preparing slaves for freedom, however, formed the wellspring of Gladstone’s appreciation of labor. He held Wilberforce in high regard. The two men shared similar religious convictions and over the years Gladstone had established a longer and closer connection with Wilberforce than had Cropper. In 1807, as the slave trade was abolished, Wilberforce himself wrote of the need for gradual emancipation. “It would be,” he wrote, “the grossest violation and the merest mockery of justice and humanity to emancipate [slaves] at once in their unhappy condition.” In the classical world, he argued, slaves could find themselves in “occupations of the highest confidence and importance, with a prospect frequently realized of emerging by emancipation into a state of liberty and comfort.” This was far from the case with modern slavery. “The soil and the climate must be prepared,” he theorized, to produce the “fruits” of liberty.⁶²

Thinking he had already made considerable strides toward amelioration and that he was in tune with men like Wilberforce, Gladstone was thus incensed by Cropper’s arguments. He astutely realized that Cropper was not as altruistic as he made himself out to be. In their testy exchange of public letters, he suggested that Cropper’s “long tirade” against West Indian slavery was “well mixed up” in a campaign to have East Indian sugar supplant that coming from the Caribbean.⁶³ Gladstone understood that Cropper was more interested in expanding sugar production in India—where he hoped to steal a march on his rivals—than in stopping slavery in the West Indies. Cropper was, as Gladstone pointed out, the biggest importer of East India sugar into Liverpool, and his other line of business was providing American cotton to the cotton mills of Lancashire. This cotton, as Gladstone pointed out, was entirely produced by the labor of American slaves. Thus, Cropper was a hypocrite who relied on one form of slavery while denouncing others.⁶⁴

Gladstone’s refutation of Cropper’s argument was sophisticated. Moreover, like Cropper, Gladstone shaped his thoughts on slavery and protectionist legislation for West Indian sugar using the language and the rationale of a modernizing man of business. For Gladstone, slavery was simply bonded labor, the lowest rung on a ladder of master-servant relations in a symbiosis ordained since time immemorial by the “almighty.”⁶⁵ Gladstone agreed with Cropper that the system was open to abuse, but he argued that his job was to “assist in practically endeavoring to improve the condition of the slaves where improvement was necessary, so as, if possible, to increase the comforts of their ... station.” In this way, his slaves would eventually come to understand their obligations to their owners as well as “the advantages of being their own masters.”⁶⁶

⁶¹ Thompson, *Earl Bathurst and the British Empire*, viii, 176, 180.

⁶² William Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade Addressed to the Freeholders and Other Inhabitants of Yorkshire* (London, 1807), 130, 258.

⁶³ Gladstone and Cropper, *Correspondence*, 15.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Gladstone was thus defensive about slavery. He had to be, given the slave revolt in Demerara in 1823. It was this revolt that had provoked both heated parliamentary debate and Cropper's earnest appeal for abolition. While the revolt lasted less than a week and was brutally suppressed by the militia of Demerara, the recriminations went on much longer. To Gladstone's embarrassment and consternation, the revolt had happened among his own slaves whom he mistakenly believed to be the best treated in the colony.⁶⁷ In his exchange with Cropper, he addressed the reasons for the revolt head on. In his view, the Demerara revolt was caused not by bad management but was instigated by British policies. Too much loose talk about emancipation had confused slaves. Moreover, the army establishment in the colony was far too low; following the Napoleonic Wars the defense establishment across the West Indies had been reduced. Neither argument, of course, was convincing. As Emilia Viotti da Costa notes, the "rebellion was the product of many contradictory historical forces" and is best described as emerging from "voices in the air," from the multiple experiences of being enslaved in a particular place under particular conditions of labor and part "of a broader world in which slavery was under attack." Slaves needed no incentive to rebel beyond the fact of their enslavement.⁶⁸

REFORMING SLAVERY

Writ large in the exchange between Cropper and Gladstone were the arguments that would dominate the debate to 1833.⁶⁹ In the process of emancipation, 1823 was an important year. For Gladstone, it was a confronting year in which his position was assailed both by his erstwhile friend and colleague Cropper and by his own rebelling slaves. He did not let his opinion rest with the exchange of letters in a local paper but sought out other friends and power brokers whose opinions he might influence, and throughout that year, tried to shape or frame the debate around ideas of amelioration. He believed that a modernized form of slavery could be beneficial to both slaves and their owners. Increasingly, he became involved in the micromanagement of his slaves' daily work. He sent detailed instructions to his managers on the regulation of the work day, time off, education, church attendance, and food supply, all in an effort to control the bodies and depress the culture of the enslaved to ever greater degrees. Keen to see his workforce improve morally, he tried to inculcate a sense of sober propriety in them by limiting the amount of rum given out as rewards.⁷⁰

Probity in business (as he understood it) was a watchword to Gladstone but so too was pre-emption. His personal correspondence in 1823 with key players in the debate invariably sought to second guess the British government and to mitigate the damage that might be inflicted on his business by the antislavery lobby. The revolt especially must have come as a shock, because in May he had written a long

⁶⁷ Gladstone to George Canning, 18 October 1823, GG.

⁶⁸ Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory*, 205.

⁶⁹ David Brion Davis, *From Homicide to Slavery: Studies in American Culture* (Oxford, 1986), 273–74.

⁷⁰ Caitlin Rosenthal, "Slavery's Scientific Management: Masters and Managers," in *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, ed. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman (Philadelphia, 2016), 62–86; and B. W. Higman, *Plantation Jamaica, 1750–1850: Capital and Control in a Colonial Economy* (Kingston, 2005).

letter to his attorney that underscored his position in this critical year and outlined what he saw as the way forward. He lamented that the “minds and passions” of the “ignorant and credulous” were “inflamed by the gross representations” of the antislavery lobby. This lament was prophetic, given that the Demerara revolt occurred just three months later around this very issue. Gladstone complained bitterly about the petitions that abolitionists had managed to procure from across a range of actors in Parliament. “Demerara,” he warned Cort, “was one of their chief concerns.”⁷¹

Gladstone felt threatened by this parliamentary atmosphere and sought to head off, even before the rebellion, what he saw as a direct attack on his livelihood. He told Cort that he had led a deposition of like-minded absentee planters to a meeting with Bathurst to gauge government opinion. At this meeting, he was given assurances by the secretary that amelioration, not emancipation, would remain the government’s priority.⁷² Directly before Gladstone sent his letter to Cort, Buxton introduced a bill in Parliament calling for improvements in the condition of the slaves. The commonly held view is that the planter lobby argued vociferously for no change;⁷³ hidebound and recalcitrant, many West Indian property owners resolutely believed that if the state of slavery was improved, slaves would be more inclined to revolt.⁷⁴ Gladstone, however, took a different tack. Reflecting his Presbyterian background, he saw the improvement of his slaves as a “calling”—his slaves were his “people.” Thus, he wrote to Cort in the aftermath of the rebellion, “I pay particular attention to the detailed accounts you have been good enough to give me of the circumstances and conduct of my people and particularly of those unfortunate individuals who took part in the revolt and have paid the forfeit with their lives.”⁷⁵ He believed that a contented workforce, properly controlled, produced excellent economic results. It was common sense to ameliorate their position because, in his mind, that would produce efficiency and greater productivity, all leading to larger profits. Profit was always the bedrock of his beliefs. By 1823, he sought to make his slaves as much like a pliant peasant labor force as possible without freeing them. It was a battle he would eventually lose but not before his middle position as a modernizing Liberal Tory had delayed proceedings for several crucial years.⁷⁶

As a result of his April 1823 meeting with Lord Bathurst, Gladstone promulgated new rules to be introduced onto his estates, notably that “Females should not be whipped nor should drivers take a whip into the fields.” Slaves should be called to their work by bells and whistles. Religious instruction should be a priority, and children should be baptized and sent to Sunday School. New churches and places of worship should be built and spread out among his estates. In addition, Gladstone argued, females in particular should be induced into marriage and Cort should

⁷¹ Gladstone to Cort, 15 May 1823, GG.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement* (Baton Rouge, 2006), 39–40.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁵ Gladstone to Cort, April 1824, GG.

⁷⁶ Moon Hu-Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore, 2006), 3.

encourage this positively through the provision of benefits. He should give pregnant women a lighter workload and mothers days off from labor. Gladstone reasoned that both he and Cort should do their best to preempt the government—first, to take the wind from the abolitionists’ sails, and second, to improve efficiency and morale on his plantations.⁷⁷

Gladstone made his intentions to force ameliorative measures into his workforce clear in his letter to Cort by pointing out that the term “driver” was now seen as “obnoxious”; he argued for using the more benign “superintendent.” In some senses, Gladstone found some sympathy for the property rights of the planters and their need to determine the pace of change. It was therefore important to him that slaves see these improvements coming from their owners rather than from the government so that they might be reminded of their owners’ good intentions. He thought he might have support in his views from a number of people in Demerara, hoping that “other friends” resident in the colony would adopt “similar measures.” Here he was disappointed. He also informed Cort that the colonial secretary had given him assurances that “pamphlets and information” would be suppressed, the police would be “extra alert,” and when the barracks were completed, a new more effective military establishment would be maintained. Crucially, he wrote that Bathurst and the government would not move on their position on slavery and would not try to force through emancipation. Thus, he could be confident that the ameliorative measures he adopted would lead to a more enlightened and reformed slavery, which would lead to greater profit making.⁷⁸

Once the news of the rebellion arrived in England toward the end of September 1823, Gladstone was again very active in heading off renewed calls for immediate abolition. In early November, he wrote to a Scottish friend, Robert Edmonstone, about the rebellion. Edmonstone was the former owner of the Demerara plantation Vreedenstein, which Gladstone had bought some years before.⁷⁹ Edmonstone still lived in the colony and so was some distance from the goings-on in London. Gladstone reassured him that the position of the government on amelioration had not changed and that he should communicate this to his “friends and neighbours.”⁸⁰ He also pointed out that he had apprised the Duke of Wellington of the military situation in the colony and had asked Wellington to push the government to send more troops.

In writing to his friend, Gladstone wanted his ideas about troop levels as well as the efforts he was making on behalf of the planters to be common knowledge in the colony. In the background in his letter was his nervousness about his popularity in Demerara. He was aware of some resentment toward a relative newcomer to plantation ownership (he did not take ownership of his principal concern, the Success plantation, until 1812) and concern about the way he bought out unprofitable estates when their former owners were at their weakest financially. His seemingly unassailable position in business was not universally admired, and many planters did not endorse his progressive views on slavery. On a wider level, there was also growing difference between absentee landlords like Gladstone and those who lived on or

⁷⁷ Gladstone to Cort, 25 May 1823, GG.

⁷⁸ Gladstone to Cort, 25 August; 31 October 1823, GG.

⁷⁹ Checkland, *Gladstones*, 124.

⁸⁰ Gladstone to Edmonstone, 8 November 1823, GG.

near their estates.⁸¹ As David Lambert has argued, “The white West Indian was a stock figure of Antislavery discourse and a white ‘other’ against which British identity was formulated.” Resident planters were increasingly distinct from absentees, not only “separated by a vast geographic distance” but by differences in “class, culture and political circumstance.”⁸²

Moreover, Gladstone was not an inheritor of plantations but a voluntary investor who, despite his piety and his long-standing and increasingly isolated belief that planters should provide religious instruction for slaves, was nevertheless a self-serving businessman, concerned above all with maximizing profit. The mortality rates on his plantations remained high. He never visited his plantations and despite his concerns about the system of slavery, he continued investing heavily into Demerara, whether slavery was ameliorated or not. Despite his wide circle of contacts, his lack of influence with the absentee planters was underscored in 1826. He was not part of a petition that year from leading planters in London to have the Privy Council remove the law that made manumission compulsory in Demerara and Berbice.⁸³ Out of step, Gladstone would belatedly sign this petition in 1827. His real influence lay in the metropolis, not Demerara.

CONCLUSION

Sir John Gladstone was a powerful force in the process of amelioration in the British West Indies. He demonstrated materially that profits could still be made from the plantation system, while he accepted, as most planters did not, that slavery needed to be reformed. Unlike J. R. Ward, however, we do not believe that amelioration was largely successful—Gladstone ultimately failed in his attempts to modify the system of slavery and to gain the support of resident planters. Nevertheless, his skilled political maneuverings in Britain and his determined efforts to implement reforms on his estates were pivotal in delaying emancipation and in encouraging what was in the end a fruitless pursuit of amelioration so that a reformed enslavement could survive.

Our argument differs from the current historiography in crucial ways. We agree with Christa Dierksheide that Gladstone represented a new kind of ameliorant but she argues that his efforts were unsuccessful, crippled by resident conservative planters who fought change tooth and nail. For Dierksheide, Gladstone was far too distant to have any real influence. We argue, conversely, that Gladstone’s metropolitan influence on politicians was considerable and pivotal. For Caroline Quarrier Spence, the late 1820s represented a phase in slavery dominated by abolitionists whose only attachment to amelioration was as a step toward freedom for the enslaved. We argue instead that Gladstone was in fact remarkably successful during that time in helping stave off the process of emancipation and in offering a realistic alternative to either emancipation or coercion. By comparison, ameliorative efforts elsewhere in the Atlantic World, such as those pursued by the Catholic and Moravian churches

⁸¹ Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory*, 35; Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean*, 6–7.

⁸² Lambert, *White Creole Culture*, 16, 147.

⁸³ *Proceedings before the Privy Council against Compulsory Manumission in the Colonies of Demerara and Berbice* (London, 1827).

in the Dutch colonies, created effective collaborative relationships between planters and missionaries that postponed abolition for decades beyond the 1820s.⁸⁴ In the United States, southern evangelical piety sought from at least 1820 to legitimize and in theory reform slavery rather than confront it.⁸⁵ If Demerara had had more planters like Gladstone, willing to work with rather than against the British government, and fewer men who believed the only response to proposed changes in slavery was uncompromising resistance, amelioration might have had a greater chance of succeeding and thus perpetuating the baleful effects of British slavery.

Gladstone was a different kind of absentee owner from those usually castigated as contributing little to West Indian development.⁸⁶ He was neither a hidebound resident planter nor a disinterested owner who cared about his possessions only as a source of ready money. His world was that of international business and finance, a world in which he held a sophisticated view of commerce, management, and ownership. He also exerted considerable sway over the orchestrators of government policy in the 1820s. He fought hard for a middle way in the process of abolition, one that would allow him to reap considerable rewards from a reformed, enlightened, and modern form of slavery, while at the same time allowing him to take paternal care of his “people.” He was aware that his profits could only be assured if planters could convince the British government that slavery was not, as Cropper insisted, deeply immoral and planters inherently savage. He was also a man of deep religious conviction who believed that a reformed slavery would best prepare enslaved people for eventual freedom, while the retention of the plantation system would bring Britain and himself handsome profits and an abundance of tropical products for the betterment of the nation. These were positions his politician son, William Ewart Gladstone, supported and defended.⁸⁷ What the study of John Gladstone and his strategies for reforming late-stage slavery in the British West Indies shows is that imperialism and amelioration were compatible. The abolitionist position that eventually prevailed in metropolitan politics by 1833 had by no means been certain of success in the preceding decade.

Moreover, Gladstone never really failed, even though his proposals for a reformed slavery could not prevail against an invigorated antislavery campaign, which in the early 1830s swept aside determined proslavery opposition. The situation of the Caribbean after abolition seemed to confirm proslavery advocates’ worst fears. The prosperous British West Indies had been wrecked, while all that the abolition of slavery seemed to have done was to shift the places where Britain purchased slave-grown sugar from its own colonies to the flourishing slave colonies of Cuba and Brazil.⁸⁸

Events interpreted in this way suggested the folly of adopting twin attacks on the protection of the economy and the protection of slaves. But the timid emancipation

⁸⁴ Armando Lampe, *Mission or Submission: Moravian and Catholic Missionaries in the Dutch Caribbean during the Nineteenth Century* (Gottingen, 2001).

⁸⁵ Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 2009).

⁸⁶ Higman, *Plantation Jamaica*, 22–29.

⁸⁷ Roland Quinault, “Gladstone and Slavery,” *Historical Journal* 52, no. 2 (June 2009): 363–83.

⁸⁸ Richard Huzzey, “Free Trade, Free Labour and Slave Sugar in Victorian Britain,” *Historical Journal* 53, no. 2 (June 2010): 359–79.

settlement of 1833–38 and the seeming failure of emancipation schemes in the older West India colonies of Jamaica and Barbados disenchanted British politicians with what abolition had wrought. By the early 1840s, they were coming round to accepting that Gladstone's views in the 1820s had been a prescient warning. The Conservative prime minister Sir Robert Peel, for example, feared in 1841 "the occupation of the soil by negroes, content with the necessaries of life—the mere agricultural produce of the country—who are to raise no exportable commodity—who can, therefore, have no trade with England."⁸⁹ Gladstone's views had a long legacy, even as Britain after 1833 appeared to have become an "anti-slavery nation." As Keith McClelland notes, "Those who see only the victory of liberal market capitalism and a culture of anti-slavery need to see, as well, that the spread of the coercive practices of indentured labor as part of the spectrum of forms of labor mobilized within Britain's global empire was a critically important dimension of the legacies of slave ownership."⁹⁰

At bottom, Gladstone believed that coercion of some kind was necessary to provide the labor that sustained the plantation system, and that without the plantation system, the West Indies would not thrive. Unlike some West Indian planters, notably in Jamaica, who became mired in economic depression after the abolition of slavery and fled the plantations, Gladstone prepared himself to keep plantation agriculture on his estates viable through other means than chattel slavery.⁹¹ His concerted plan, put into action from 1837–38, to use Indian indentured labor to replace enslaved labor provided one of the bases for the large-scale adoption of the system by the 1840s in Trinidad and British Guiana. Gladstone's close connections with sympathetic state officials who backed his scheme led to substantial importation of indentured Indian labor into British Guiana (at least initially—protest against what he had done brought about the suspension of overseas labor migration in 1839 and forced him to divest himself of most of his Demerara holdings and invest in India and in British railways).⁹² By the 1840s, under both Conservative and Whig governments, government support for immigration schemes increased, with Indian labor allowing the plantation system in British Guiana to survive and the colony's economic prosperity to be sustained. At the same time, restrictive legislation severely compromised the ability of freed slaves to operate outside of the plantation economy. The only legitimate option for most ex-slaves and Indian laborers was to find plantation employment.⁹³ Thus, as enthusiasm for laissez-faire policies in the management of

⁸⁹ Sir Robert Peel, 18 May 1841, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3d ser., vol. 58, col. 618.

⁹⁰ Keith McClelland, "Redefining the West India Interest: Politics and the Legacies of Slave-Ownership," in *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain*, ed. Catharine Hall et al. (Cambridge, 2014), 127–62, at 155.

⁹¹ For the flight of planters from the British West Indies after emancipation, see Douglas Hall, "The Flight from the Estates Reconsidered: The British West Indies, 1838–1842," *Journal of Caribbean History* 10–11 (1978): 7–24.

⁹² For the "Gladstone slave trade" in South Asian indentured servants, see Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor Migration in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, 1998), 25, 32–34. For contemporary criticism of Gladstone, see Jonathan Connolly, "Indentured Labour Migration and the Meaning of Emancipation: Free Trade, Race and Labour in British Public Debate, 1838–1860," *Past and Present* 238, no. 1 (February 2018): 85–119, at 90.

⁹³ J. L. G. Rose, "Behold the Tax Man Cometh?: Taxation as a Tool of Oppression in Early Post-Emancipation British Guiana, 1838–48," in *In the Shadow of the Plantation: Caribbean History and Legacy*, ed. Alvin O. Thompson (Kingston, 2002), 297–313.

emancipation diminished after 1840, Gladstone's economic protectionist views were largely vindicated by circumstances.⁹⁴ By the time his son had become the leading politician in Britain, the assumptions of the father had become the policy of the British government. William Gladstone was a passionate campaigner for liberty, but in his views on slavery he shared with his father the belief that people of African descent had to be kept in subjection, if not in slavery, because "in the case of negro slavery ... it was the case of a race of higher capacities ruling over a race of lower capacities."⁹⁵ Such views reflected John Gladstone's long-lasting influence on British thinking about the protection of black slaves.

⁹⁴ Richard Huzzey, "Concepts of Liberty: Freedom, *Laissez-Faire*, and the State after Britain's Abolition of Slavery," in *Emancipation and the Remaking of the British World*, ed. Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, and Keith McClelland (Manchester, 2014), 149–71; Checkland, *Gladstones*, 321–25.

⁹⁵ Cited in Quinault, "Gladstone and Slavery," 379.