

A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY COMMENTARY ON LABOR AND MILITARY PROBLEMS IN BARBADOS

Edited and Transcribed

by

Jerome S. Handler and Lon Shelby

Southern Illinois University

INTRODUCTION

The anonymously authored manuscript reproduced below* was written in late 1667 (or early 1668) towards the end of, or shortly after, England's war with the French and Dutch. Barbados was approaching the peak of its economic prosperity and its preservation as an English possession was of great concern; it was especially important that the island be able to defend itself militarily. Aside from the condition of Barbadian fortifications, the militia was, to many observers, considerably weakened by the decline in the European population, especially the poorer elements upon whose services the militia depended for its effectiveness.

The very forces that had been responsible for Barbadian economic prosperity now militated against retention of the island's European population. The expansion of sugar plantations debilitated the small land-holding system, thus depriving many poor Europeans of what had primarily motivated their coming to Barbados in the first place; or, in the case of indentured servants, of what had encouraged them to stay when their period of service was over. With the loss of Europeans and the concomitant rise in dependency upon African slaves, it became increasingly difficult to fill the host of artisan and other specialized roles needed for the maintenance of sugar plantations. Plantation owners began to fill these positions with their slaves, thereby further lessening opportunities in the island for poor Europeans.

These processes, and their consequences upon the island's military capabilities, are among the major concerns of the manuscript. It provides a source of information on these matters and is a contemporary account which we hope will be of interest to readers of this journal.

* The manuscript, titled "Some Observations on the Island Barbadoes," is located in the Public Record Office, London (C.O. 1/21, no. 170). We have modernized the spelling and have made some alterations in punctuation; other modifications are included in brackets. A slightly abbreviated and modified version is published in the *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, America and West Indies, 1661-1668* (London, 1880, pp. 528-530). See V.T. Harlow (*A History of Barbados 1625-1685*, Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1926, pp. 153-194) for a detailed discussion of the military, political, and economic conditions of the period in which the manuscript was written.

LABOR AND MILITARY PROBLEMS

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE ISLAND BARBADOES

I find this island for the first seven years to have been little improved, occasioned by the various factions that arose upon the distinct claims of the then Lord Chamberlain, Philip Earl of Pembroke etc., and the Earl of Carlisle - in the latter, the right centered by a commission from King Charles the First in that behalf.

The island at first promised not so much as after experience taught its inhabitants to put a value on it, and by the great encouragement of the Dutch, became a flourishing colony and people more constant to their habitations than in any other (of) the southern settlements. By which means it was in the year 1643 (after it had been planted seventeen years) stronger than all the Caribbean islands of English inhabitants, there being then 18,600 effective men of which 8,300 were proprietors. Its value at that time, sugar plantations being but in their infancy, (was) not one seventeenth part so considerable as in the year 1666, but the real strength (was) treble what it is at this time, which may be computed by the customs books etc. The Negro slaves not being in the year 1643 above 6,400 were, by computation, in the year 1666 above 50,000. Their buildings in the year 1643 were generally mean, and within their houses (were) only things for necessity. In the year 1666 I found by a rational estimate the plates, jewels, and extraordinary households stuffs to be worth about £500,000. And their buildings, very fair and beautiful, which at a small distance ordinarily present themselves like castles, and their houses built for making and preserving sugar and for other offices, with their Negro huts, show themselves about two leagues at sea like so many small towns, each defended by its castle. This formidable prospect, with the condition the Dutch left the Barbados in the year 1651, when they were expelled thence by Sir George Ayscue etc., has I really judge, diverted the French and Dutch from its attack (during) this last war. For could those nations (have) made any just measures of the numbers, but especially the quality, of the inhabitants the condition was such they might easily have become master of it.

For first they are not above 760 considerable proprietors and not above 8,000 effective men, of which two-thirds are of no interest or reputation and of little innate courage, being poor men that are just permitted to live, and a very great part Irish, derided by the Negroes and branded with the epithet of white slaves. And indeed, except the proprietors, merchants, some tradesmen, and those few officers, with the dependents on the same, the rest are only such that have not reason enough (to) discern their abuses, or not courage to embark and leave the island, or that are in debit and cannot go; while others, more strict (ly) computing of their injuries, have at several times gone off, at least 12,000 good men, formerly proprietors and tradesmen - wormed out of their small settlements by their more subtle and greedy neighbors.

They are thus computed: between the years 1643 and 1647, to New England, at least 1,200 men; to Trinidad and Tobago, 600 men; between the years 1646 and the years 1658, to Virginia and Surinam, 2,400 men; to the French and Dutch settlements on the Islands of Guadeloupe, Martinique, Marie Galante, Grenada, Tobago and Curacao, from 1650 to 1662, 1,600 tradesmen; went off with Col. Venables in his expedition to Hispaniola, and since to Jamaica, 3,300 men; with Francis Lord Willoughby of Parham to the settling (of) St. Lucia, 1,300 men perished in that design; went off with Major Scott in his expedition against the Dutch, in the year 1665, on the island Tobago and the Province of New Zealand, on the main of Guiana, 800 men; with Colonel Henry Willoughby (in) 1666 for regaining St. Christopher's 1,000 men; the same year with Francis Lord Willoughby upon the same design, 2,000 men, most of which men were either lost in the hurricane or are since killed or dead; and the mortalities and those that have slipped away without tickets from the license office may equal those that have since the year 1651 been transplanted thither; so that those left upon the island are, for their number and quality, fit only, upon a just consequence, rather to betray than defend so valuable a country.

Of men born upon the island, few have gone off; (they) may be accounted 1,500 men and youth, which are the best infantry of the country.

If the weakness of the country be considered, the cause will be found. First, the land monopolized into so few hands (which now in that island cannot be remedied, but in resettling others it may, as Antigua and Montserrat which have been depopulated by the enemy).

Secondly, the several factions among the planters (which are the gentlemen of the country, and are almost every (one) considerable proprietors, either a colonel, lieutenant colonel, major, captain, or lieutenant) occasioned by this means: since the year 1626, its first settlement, there have been divers governors and substitutes, viz. Captain Powell, Captain Wolverstone, Sir William Tufton, Colonel Hawley, Major Huncks, Sir Henry Huncks, Col. Bell, President Sir Richard Pierce, Francis Lord Willoughby, Mr. Searle (put in by the Parliament (in) 1652), Col. Modiford (by the same Parliament (in) 1659), (and) Col. Walrond (president in the right of Francis Lord Willoughby). In the year 1662 Francis Lord Willoughby took possession himself, against whom the people were strangely disaffected and are still dissatisfied with that family. All these governors changed their favorites, put the militia into new hands, (and) elected new councillors and judges, so that dependents upon each governor are, with their adherents, the many distinct factions to this day. The now Lord Willoughby, upon his arrival, new modelled the militia and all other offices, put out most of the deceased lord's friends, and took in his professed enemies. It wrought this effect: those discarded were chosen by the Assembly, and became great creatures for the country, and unravelled all the designs left in writing by the late Lord Willoughby, and pressed this now lord to engage by promise the making (of) no alteration in government without the advice of the Assembly - to which he readily consents, promising they shall always be his solid counsel. And he judges they

are well-satisfied with him, which I know to be his very great mistake, in that they have plainly declared that till he ratifies the acts of non-claims to cut off his Majesty's pretence to the 10,000 acres, the present proprietors of that land can have no security nor good title to the land so in dispute.

Thirdly, the proprietors wormed out between 1643 and 1654, with the tradesmen since, has rendered the island in the weak condition it is in, which negligence in some, and present interest in others, do not regard. For the proprietors being gone, the tradesmen, with whom they formerly mated, betook themselves to depend upon the gentlemen of the country upon easier terms than formerly. The planters, grown now full of Negroes, design to have all other tradesmen, sugar boilers, refiners (or at least many of them) of their blacks; for to effect which, they place with all their tradesmen Negroes, giving those tradesmen respectively some consideration. In few years, by this means, the tradesmen wrought themselves into little esteem; this occasioned their great flocking into all parts and on the most dangerous designs. I have, for my particular satisfaction, inspected many (of) their plantations and have seen 30, sometimes 40, Christians - English, Scotch, and Irish - at work in the parching sun without shirt, shoe, or stocking, which (sic) their Negroes have been at work at their respective trades in a good condition. By which the whole may be quickly endangered, for now it's not as formerly. There are many thousands of slaves that speak English, either born there or brought young into the country. And to have many (of) the leading men slaves in a plantation may, if an enemy sit down before it, be easily wrought upon to betray a country, especially upon the promise of freedom. For should Holland or France, or both, gain Barbados its situation, wealth, and trade makes them master of the whole Indies.

And how each party abets its faction in the greatest dangers would amaze any Englishman to see it, and something of it may be seen in their address to the King in 1667. And I have heard when Francis Lord Willoughby urged that there might be during the war a thousand men in pay, and to be in constant duty in the forts and platforms on the leeward side of the island (where for 24 miles together men may land, except in the very places of their forts—between which, in many places, there is 6 or 7 miles distance, and in all places 3 or 4 miles without platforms), they have replied (that) they had as good lose all as have veteran soldiers (and) that they did not doubt to defend the island when an enemy came before it; but (they) could not demonstrate how, neither in reason or justice. For to compel men that have neither house, land, goods, wife or children, or pay, to be sometimes 4 or 5 days together upon duty without so much as victuals, save which they stole, was certainly severe. But this was their practice, for from the commencing (of) the war to the arrival of Sir Tobias Bridges (and) his regiment there were not on the whole island 40 men in pay. The circumstances considered, I am persuaded the like has not been practiced in the whole world. For were not the people factious that are mainly concerned, it's not in my creed to believe a people, whose all is beyond

the seas, will run the gauntlet of a hazardous fortune for the interest of their native country when good terms are proffered them by an enemy. Not that I believe it will ever come to that; for I know where there is not a propriety to oblige auxiliaries (of which consist their infantry), there cannot be much expected from them.

Fourthly, the Jews that inhabit there, not having like liberty as in other islands possessed by the Dutch and French, have been very treacherous to the island, though it pleased God their designs were only to discover when the English were ready to embark against the French and Dutch, and in the matter (of) the relief of Antigua, and had not the measures, the quality, and number of the inhabitants. For the constant egress and regress that the strangers have in the towns on the sea side (there being seldom fewer than 60 or 70 sails of ships) does not only deceive the Jews, but the most ingenious inhabitants judge they are stronger than really they are.

I humbly offer that, as an expedient, unless his Majesty had a certain strength of veteran soldiers to keep up his interest (as the Spaniard, French and Dutch have in their settlements), that first a delatory letter in answer to their last petition be in a convenient time dispatched, which will not only keep up their hopes of being a Republic, but will extract their whole desire from them, by which there may be a just measure of that people and their designs. Secondly, a letter may be sent to William Lord Willoughby to command his great courtesy to that people, especially to all leading men in that country, for upon keeping or losing the Barbados depends the whole interest and trade of the West Indies.