



# The Gladstone Family and the Business of Slavery

by Steve Cushion

## Sir John Gladstone of Fasque (1764 - 1851)

John Gladstone was born in Leith, Scotland, the son of Thomas Gladstones, a grain merchant. He served his apprenticeship in a rope and sailcloth company, on completion of which he entered his father's business. He travelled widely on business and eventually settled in Liverpool where he made a small fortune as a partner in the trading company Corrie, Gladstone & Bradshaw, which he managed to take over and rename John Gladstone & Company in 1801. In 1814, he began trading with the East Indies when the monopoly of the East India Company was broken.

His interest in the West Indies had begun early in his career and by 1803 he was importing sugar and cotton from the Caribbean, and especially Demerara [later British Guiana]. He lent large sums of money to plantation owners and, when some of them were unable to repay their debts, he foreclosed on their mortgages. He acquired a half interest in *Le Success* plantations in Demerara in 1812, acquiring full ownership in 1816. He changed from coffee to sugar production and doubled the number of enslaved labourers to around 300. By 1820, by similar foreclosures, he owned a total of seven such plantations. He never visited the Caribbean, leaving the management of his interests in Demerara to his attorney Frederick Cort.<sup>1</sup>

The abolition campaign in Britain, after a relative lull in activity following the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, was relaunched in 1823, when the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions was founded and Thomas Fowell Buxton moved a resolution in the House of Commons condemning enslavement as "repugnant to the principles of the British constitution and of the Christian religion", and called for its gradual abolition. Despite the efforts of George Canning, Foreign Secretary and later Prime Minister, he also urged the government to send dispatches to the colonies to improve the treatment of slaves.<sup>2</sup>

John Gladstone was a Member of Parliament from 1818 until 1827 and Chairman of the Liverpool West India Association as well as being a close friend and colleague of George Canning. Together, realising that there was a need to undermine the activities of the abolitionist faction in the House of Commons and proposed a series of reforms collectively known as "Amelioration".<sup>3</sup> In 1823, therefore, resolutions

1 Richard Sheridan, "The Condition of Slaves on the Sugar Plantations of Sir John Gladstone in the Colony of Demerara 1812 to 1849". *New West Indian Guide*. 76 (2002) pp.243-4

2 Sheridan, *The Condition of Slaves on the Sugar Plantations of Sir John Gladstone*, p.247

3 Trevor Burnard and Kit Candlin. "Sir John Gladstone and the Debate over the Amelioration of Slavery in the British West Indies in the 1820s." *Journal of British Studies* 57, no. 4 (2018) pp. 760-82

were sent to the colonial assemblies urging them to pass legislation "ameliorating" the conditions under which enslaved labourers worked. Lord Bathurst, the Colonial Secretary drafted a series of measures for the 'improvement' of the enslaved. There should be better provision for the religious instruction of the slaves, while Sunday markets should be abolished so that the enslaved could attend church. The punishment of enslaved men was to be regulated, the whip should not be used casually in the field and the flogging of enslaved women was forbidden. Families, should not be separated. There was to be legal recognition of the right of the enslaved to hold property and the admission of their evidence against white colonists in court as well as encouraging the manumission of those who could afford to buy their own freedom.<sup>4</sup>

This attempt to head off demands for the eventual abolition of slavery was widely misunderstood by the plantocracy in the Caribbean who saw it as unjustified interference in their "right to private property", that is, their profits. In Demerara, the colonial authorities discussed the resolutions but made no public declaration as to their intention to implement them. Nevertheless, word of the existence of these instructions from London quickly reached the ears of the enslaved. Believing that the British Parliament had legislated their freedom, they planned militant activity to secure what they saw as their rights that were being withheld by the plantation oligarchy.

Enslaved workers on *Le Success* plantation, owned by Sir John Gladstone, led by Jack and his father Quamina, organised an uprising, which quickly spread to neighbouring estates as, in the manner of flying pickets, large groups went from one plantation to another calling the enslaved workers to join them. The Demerara rebels made no move to kill or injure the plantation management, merely locking the overseers, managers, and bookkeepers in the slave stocks, commandeering any weapons they found. There was some looting, ransacking of buildings and cane fields were set on fire. Where owners, managers or overseers resisted and firefights developed, a few of them were wounded or killed, but the leaders of the uprising did their best to prevent unnecessary loss of life amongst the enslavers. There were surprisingly few casualties amongst plantation management, although many of the most hated of them were abused, humiliated and slapped while in the stocks, particularly by the enslaved women.<sup>5</sup>

The rebels, numbering about 9000, attempted to negotiate with the governor of the island and the commander of the troops about their rights to wages, days without

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4 Michael Taylor, *The Interest: How the British Establishment Resisted the Abolition of Slavery* (London : The Bodley Head, 2020) p.61

5 Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) pp.207-250

labour, and freedom. In many ways, the actions by the enslaved workers represented a form of "collective bargaining by riot", not dissimilar from the "Captain Swing" and "Luddite" disturbances then occurring in England.<sup>6</sup> Considering the circumstances, little damage was done to property. Despite the relatively peaceful nature of the action, the colonial authorities brutally suppressed the revolt. Killing hundreds of slaves both in combat and by execution following drumhead courts-martial. There were a series of show trials followed by public executions, performed as a grisly pageant designed to terrify the enslaved workers and reassure the enslavers who had been badly frightened.

The nature of this uprising has been much debated in the historiography, with some seeing it as an attempt at the revolutionary overthrow of the whole institution of enslavement, while others see it as an armed, but reformist, demonstration intending to secure rights that they believed were legally theirs.<sup>7</sup> Both these positions oversimplify the dynamic of the class struggle, revolutionaries frequently lead strikes and demonstrations with reformist aims when they see no possibility of immediate revolution, while reformist workers, in the heat of the struggle frequently shift to revolutionary positions.

Mary Turner argues that enslaved workers would often engage in forms of protest, not dissimilar from the forms of industrial action by employed workers, in order to obtain increased provisions, lighter workloads, the removal of hated overseers, greater access to provision grounds and other reforms to their working conditions. For instance, they would all gather at the boundary of the estate and refuse to work, but not leave the premises so that they could not be accused of trying to escape.<sup>8</sup> Such day to day individual and collective resistance helped build the solidarity necessary for the uprising. The cause of the uprising cannot be traced to any single cause, at bottom it was the very institution of slavery and the years of frustration that finally spilled over into revolt.

The terrified slave owners painted a picture of the rebels as violent, bloodthirsty brutes.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the *Edinburgh Review*, an anti-slavery journal wrote:

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6 Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012) p.21

Carl Griffin, *Protest, Politics and Work in Rural England, 1700-1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

7 see Janet Mills, "*Quamina, do you hear this?*" *Revisiting the Demerara Slave Rebellion, 1823* (MA thesis, Dalhousie University Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2018) for a full discussion of the historiography.

8 Mary Turner, *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: The Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1995)

9 Joshua Bryant, *Accounts of the Insurrection of the Negro Slaves in the Colony of Demerara* (Demerara: Guiana Chronicle Office, Georgetown 1824)

In Demerara, a slight commotion was occasioned among the Negroes . . . and far more resembling a combination of European workmen to strike for wages, for time or other indulgence than a rebellion of African slaves.<sup>10</sup>

Reversing the allegations that the abolitionists in London had inspired the revolt, Gelien Matthews places the initiative with the enslaved themselves saying "The slaves seemed to make a point of identifying their overt resistance with the debates taking place in Britain on their behalf by timing their risings to follow each wave of abolitionist activity". The racist contempt of the plantation owners meant that they could not believe that the rebels were responsible for such a sophisticated strategy. The editor of the *Demerara Gazette* concluded on August 28, 1823, that "the plans and arrangements of the rebels were most extensive and well made - too well made indeed to admit of a doubt but a superior order of people had laid the original foundation".<sup>11</sup> They found a convenient scapegoat in the Reverend John Smith, the preacher at the church where Jack and Quamina worshipped. He was sentenced to death but died from his conditions of imprisonment before they could execute him. Typically, John Smith's judicial murder caused more outrage in elite abolitionist circles London than all the hundreds of dead Africans. However, Sir John Gladstone advanced the opinion that: "I was not sorry to hear of Smith's death as his release would have been followed by much cavil and discussion here".

Nevertheless, some workers in Britain adopted an position of solidarity with the enslaved. As an anti-slavery track of the period argued.

the miners of Cornwall, ... the ironworkers of Wales,... the keelmen of the Tyne, ... the weavers of Lancashire, ... the unhappy affair at Manchester, ... large bodies of Spitalfields crowded last year to Westminster filling Palace-Yard and all the avenues and passages of the House of Parliament with their numbers, beseeching and imploring the members of the Legislatures to protect them from the unjust purposes of their masters ... Or take a stronger case, that of the agricultural labourers, who in open day have been proceeding in bodies to the destruction of threshing machines, and to other acts of destruction of lawless violence; or that of the Luddites or, that of the Blanketeers. And let us ask whether it would have been endured that even these individuals should have been dealt with as the poor, ignorant, oppressed, cart-whipped slaves of Demerara have been dealt with?<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the similarity between the rebels in Demerara and the rebels in England was obvious to radicals in Britain.

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10 *Edinburgh Review* 41, no. 81 (October 1824)

11 Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement*, pp.9, 45

12 "Negro Slavery. No. VII. Insurrections of Slaves in the West Indies, Particularly in Demerara" pp. 60–61 cited in Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement*, p.78

Quamina was "shot while trying to escape", while Jack was sentenced to death, but after an appeal for clemency by Sir John Gladstone, was exiled to St Lucia where he was sentenced to hard labour. Seventy-three people who were tried by court marshal, 70 of whom were found guilty, including 21 who were executed, including 10 who were decapitated after being hanged and had their heads put on poles, while the remainder were brutally flogged. Hundreds of others were murdered by soldiers during and in the immediate aftermath of the uprising.

David Lammy MP, the Shadow Foreign Secretary has written to the British government asking it to pardon 70 abolitionists convicted for their role in the historic 1823 Demerara rebellion. He said exercising the royal prerogative of mercy to grant pardons to those involved in the uprising would be "a significant step in Britain's acknowledgment of its role in the history of slavery".

Thomas Harding, the author of *White Debt* said:

The men and women who took part in the Demerara uprising of 1823 were attempting to abolish British slavery. It was a British court martial which found the 70 people guilty, a court established by a British governor in a British colony (later known as 'British Guiana'), on behalf of the British king, under British military code.

Now is the time for the British government to take full responsibility for its legacy of slavery, to pardon the 'Demerara 70' and recognise them for what they were: heroes, for all of us.<sup>13</sup>

Anya Jabour says of the whole attempt at "amelioration":

a new and hostile disease environment, coupled with extreme work loads and inadequate diet, put enslaved Africans and their descendants in the New World in a precarious position. The situation was compounded by miserliness and racism, which induced slaveowners, doctors, and even slaves' advocates to overlook evidence of slave malnutrition and illness. Slaves were punished for complaining of poor health, exhibiting signs of illness and malnutrition, and for attempting to augment the scanty official care given them. As a result, proposed measures for improving slave health and achieving natural increase were ineffective. Racism and profit-seeking were key elements in the demographic debacle of Caribbean slavery.<sup>14</sup>

Sir John Gladstone relied on his attorney, Frederick Cort, for information about conditions on his property in Demerara and Cort had every interest in painting a rosy

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13 Thomas Harding, *White Debt: The Demerara Uprising and Britain's Legacy of Slavery* (London : Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2022)

*David Lammy requests pardon for 1823 slave rebellion convicts*, Guardian, 13 February 2022

14 Anya Jabour, "Slave Health and Health Care in the British Caribbean: Profits, Racism and the Failure of Amelioration in Trinidad and British Guiana, 1824-1834". *The Journal of Caribbean History* 28 (1994) p.17

picture, just as Gladstone wanted to believe that all was well. Gladstone shared this positive image with parliamentary colleagues such as George Canning and used these reports to counteract the propaganda of the anti-slavery faction. So he was completely confounded when he discovered that the revolt had started on his own property at *Le Success*. However, it did not take him long to argue that "negroes, when not enslaved, were idle, insolent, slothful and averse to outdoor work".<sup>15</sup> Of course, Gladstone had every reason to want to believe that *Le Success* was being properly run, he had purchased it for £80,000 [£106,700,000] and made him a profit of £10,000 [£13,340,000] a year, 12.5%.<sup>16</sup> The revolt of 1823 did nothing to dissuade Gladstone from increasing his investment in the West Indies and, by a mixture of foreclosing ruthlessly on debts and buying the property of the recently deceased from inheritors who were not entirely *au fait* with the value of their inheritance, he became one of the most important owners of land and slave in the region.

Nevertheless, he was not so naive as to believe every word that Frederick Court sent him, useful as it had been in his attempts to undermine the abolitionist movement. So he sent his son Robertson to investigate in 1828. Robertson found that Cort was idle, corrupt, greedy and brutal, but worst of all in the eyes of the Gladstone family, an incompetent manager. He was summarily dismissed. Of course, this revelation that Cort's reports were self-seeking and untrue did nothing to persuade Robertson or his Father that the institution of enslavement was wrong. Robertson wrote:

"Every comfort is theirs. Slavery is to them a name without a meaning - preaching did and has inflamed their minds; but fortunately for their own welfare those doctrines which were held out to them pretending to be grounded upon the faith of the Christian religion have vanished like the shadow they were composed of. Now they are once more contented and happy, and will remain so, if allowed to live undisturbed by the meddling and ill disposed. They know little of the character of the Negro and West Indies who suppose the people to be a wretched race: no, it is the contrary - they are what others are not, happy!".<sup>17</sup>

None so blind as those who will not see!

John Gladstone, who was the biggest single claimant of compensation when slavery was abolished in 1838, was associated with eleven different compensation claims. He owned 2,508 enslaved workers in British Guiana and Jamaica and received a compensation payment of £106,769 [£132,200,000].

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15 Correspondence with James Cropper, 1824

16 S G. Checkland, *The Gladstones: A Family Biography, 1764-1851* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p.196

17 Checkland, *The Gladstones*, p.200

More than enough to salve a conscience.

As late as 1830, he was still defending slavery while advocating gradual amelioration, leading to to emancipation when it was "safe and not unjust to the planters".<sup>18</sup>

### **William Gladstone**

Sir John Gladstone had other sons, one of whom was a Tory MP and another was to become the leading Liberal politician, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Prime Minister, William Gladstone. For more than 30 years, William Gladstone was dependent on his father for his income and political expenses. His father gave him a large annual allowance and paid half of his expenses when he stood for election at Newark. In addition received at least £120,000 from his father around the time of his death in 1851.<sup>19</sup> This money came from the unpaid labour of enslaved Africans in Guyana

During the Newark campaign, William Gladstone spoke of the need for "measures for the moral advancement and further legal protection of our fellow subjects in slavery", while stressing the need for Christian education and the inculcation of "honest and industrious habits" and concluding by saying "let emancipation go hand in hand with fitness to enjoy freedom". Furthermore he claimed that there was nothing in scripture that stated slavery was "absolutely and necessarily sinful".<sup>20</sup> The same slowly, slowly attitude that his father had pioneered in Parliament, attempting to delay emancipation as long as possible by saying that the enslaved were not able to profit from freedom yet. The expression "honest and industrious habits" can be interpreted as meaning that the workers in the West Indies should be ready to be exploited by their previous owners without complaint or resistance. A theme he pursued further in his speech to Parliament opposing emancipation in 1833: "I would not free the slave without assurance of his disposition to industry".

He managed to get himself onto the Parliamentary committee discussing the detail of the bill and was thus able to be part of the move to compensate the owners with £20 million pounds for their loss of property rights in the enslaved workers. In 1835 he was closely involved in pushing his father's compensation claim. Sir John Gladstone would receive one of the highest compensation payments, although William Gladstone opposed the publication of a parliamentary account of how much individuals had received in payment.

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18 John Gladstone, *Facts relating to slavery in the West Indies and America, contained in a letter to Sir Robert Peel Bt.* (London, 1830)

19 Checkland, Gladstones, *A Family Biography* (Cambridge, 1971) p. 416

20 Gladstone's address to the Newark electors, 8 Oct. 1832, quoted in Roland Quinault, "Gladstone and Slavery." *The Historical Journal* 52, no. 2 (2009) p.367

## **Postscript**

Historian Louise Raw wrote recently:

As there's talk of removing a statue I've written a lot about, of William Gladstone on Bow Road in east London, we should also consider honouring the women forced to pay for it in 1882. The unveiling took place in 1882 at the behest of their hugely wealthy bosses Bryant and May, who'd forced the match-women to pay for the statue from already starvation wages. The firm made workers attend the ceremony – but watched in horror as the women turned it into a protest, attacking the statue with rocks, jabbing their fingers with hatpins to stain it red, and shouting "our blood paid for this!".

A local tradition has grown up for the statue's outstretched hand is painted red to signify the stain of blood.