

## **A slave-owner's defence of his treatment of the enslaved: Forster Clarke in 1824**

A committee of the Council of Barbados produced a report in 1824 which sought to defend slavery and the treatment of the enslaved by planters against the 'enemies of the West Indies who had charged that there prevailed 'the grossest injustice...irreligion and immorality...the most unprecedented degradation, and unrelenting cruelty'. One of those who gave evidence to the committee was Forster Clarke, whose testimony is given below.

Source:

*A Report of a Committee of the Council of Barbadoes, appointed to inquire into the actual condition of the slaves in this island* (London, 1824), pp. 105-12.

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[p.105]

*Examination of Forster Clarke, Esq. (on Oath).*

*Query 1.* What is your situation in life?

*Ans.* Examinant saith — that he is a Planter owning an Estate, and an Attorney to nineteen others belonging to absentee proprietors, on which there is a population of 4589 Slaves, of which he does not believe that there is at this moment a single one absent, or under disgrace or punishment for any crime.

*Qu. 2.* What is the condition and treatment of the Slaves on the plantations under your direction, in respect to food, clothing, general comforts, labour and punishments. Is the cart-whip or cow-skin whip in general used as an instrument of punishment, and is it customary to expose the [p. 106] female Slaves indecently when subjected to punishment?

*Ans.* Examinant saith — he is convinced that the Negroes have a sufficient allowance of food, as they are frequently enabled to sell a part of it; that they are never stinted under any circumstances of scarcity arising from unfavourable seasons or failure of crops, as in that case corn or other food would be provided for them by purchase. The usual allowances on estates under his direction are as follows: — each grown Negro has per day one pint and a half of Guinea-corn, or two pints of Indian-corn, making 4½ or 5 lbs. when dressed, or 4½ or 5 lbs. of roots, and sometimes more when there is any great abundance, as is often the case, of those crops, in addition to which a plentiful meal is provided for every one at dinner. They have all a pint of tea every morning before they set to work, with an allowance of weak diversion, (i.e. rum and water sweetened with molasses) once or twice a day, and a pint of beverage made of molasses and water; they have also a weekly allowance of one pound of fish, one pint of molasses, and half a pint of salt; on festivals they have extra allowances of pork and other provisions. The children [p. 107] have three dressed meals daily, which is served to them under the eye of the manager; the old and infirm people are also provided with dressed meals. That the clothing for every man is a

Pennistone jacket, an Oznabrugs shirt and trowsers, and a woollen cap or hat. The women have a full-sized jacket of Pennistone, an Osnabrugs petticoat, a handkerchief and a woollen cap; on some estates they have a check chemise besides, and the children have likewise an annual suit. The quantity of clothing may appear insufficient for a year, but the Negroes, or at least the industrious part of them, have ample means of procuring additional raiment, and they are always observed to be not only decently but comfortably clad. A house is built for each family at the expense of the estate, who have a small piece of ground allotted to them, on which they cultivate for themselves provision and other crops, by the sale of which and the raising of hogs and poultry they are enabled to indulge themselves in dress and other comforts. The superannuated and infirm people have all their allowances continued for life, and often receive extra helps. The hours of work are generally from about six in the morning, or in the low days a little before, till [p. 108] nine, when an hour is allowed for breakfast; they again set to work at ten, and come home to dinner at one; at three they set to work again and work till six, or in the long days, when the sun sets after six, it might be a little after; so that they seldom work more than three hours at a time, and not more than nine hours for the day, at that season of the year when the days are short, and nine hours and a half when the days are long. In the crop time, (which does not last more than one third of the year, if all the days employed in making sugar were put together), the people employed about the works, amounting on a large estate to about fifteen or sixteen, are detained till eight or nine o'clock at night, and sometimes, but very rarely, later; and then, all of those are not required to remain to the last — they come out the next morning when the other Negroes go to work. It is usual, on most estates, for the Negroes on Sunday mornings to bring up with them a bundle of grass, at eight o'clock, and receive their allowances for that day, after which they are never called upon to do any thing, and Saturday afternoons are very commonly given to them; — that on some estates he has abolished the bringing of grass on Sunday mornings, which, however, occupies [p. 109] a very short time. There is a good Hospital on almost every estate, which is generally a clean well-ventilated building, provided with cabins and other conveniences, and beds for such as are ill to lie on. To the sick, proper and regular nutriment is allowed, and no expense is spared for such articles as the doctor thinks necessary for them: a practitioner attends every day, and a surgeon or physician is called whenever required. From the time the breeding women report themselves with child, they are withdrawn from the large gang, and employed about very light work till delivered; — baby-linen is provided for them, candles and other necessaries sent them, and a midwife paid to attend them, a nurse of their own choice to keep them in for the month, which they are allowed to stay in, and upon coming out they receive a small present of money, and for three months after they do little more than attend to their children. When the children grow a little stronger, the mothers come out at seven o'clock in the morning, leave the children in the nursery, and go to work; they come home at nine, go to work again at ten, and draw off at twelve; in the afternoon, they go to work at three, and draw off at five; they then come home and take their [p. 110] children to their houses. The children are generally weaned at the age of eighteen months. On every estate a proper building for a Nursery is erected, where the infants are kept during the day, under the care of elderly women as nurses, with a sufficient quantity of pap

provided to feed them with, in the absence of their mothers.

The Overseers of the field-work, or, as they are often called, Drivers, are permitted at no time to give a Negro more than six stripes with a cat; if the obstinacy or unruly conduct of any Negro require a greater punishment he is reported to the manager. Examinant saith — He knows of no other punishments but solitary confinement, or moderate flogging with a cat; the female Slaves are never exposed when punished, the cart-whip or cow-skin is never permitted to be used upon the estates under his care, and he believes that it is generally laid aside as an instrument of punishment.

*Qu.* 3. From your knowledge of the habits of the Negroes, are you prepared to say whether or not the women get husbands at an early age, and can you undertake to assert with confidence, whether or not they are restrained from contracting engagements of this kind, by their licentious intercourse with the white men on the estates?

[p. 111] *Ans.* Examinant saith — that although he does not think the young women do in general settle themselves very early with husbands, he is not of opinion, that they are often prevented from doing so, by their intercourse with the whites; it can seldom or never be the effect of arbitrary influence, as he attends to the complaints of every Negro, and he believes that most others do the same, and such conduct would ever be resented and punished by the discharge of any white servant, or manager who attempted it; that an illicit intercourse does often exist there can be no doubt, but from the small number of Mulatto children born in estates, it would appear that such connexions were not so often formed as might be expected.

*Qu.* 4. What are your opinions respecting the religious instruction of the Slaves by Clergymen of the Established Church?:

*Ans.* Examinant saith — that he is willing to give every encouragement to such plans of religious instruction, as he thinks calculated to do any good; and that, although he has not permitted Methodist Missionaries to preach in any of the estates for which he is concerned, he has for some time past, allowed a man of religious [p. 112] habits to attend his own, and some other Negroes under his direction, for the purpose of giving such instruction as they were capable of receiving ; that he thinks much good may be done by a safe and efficient plan of religious instruction towards the moral improvement of the Negroes, and that men of good character and moderate acquirements, but sufficiently informed for the undertaking, are best calculated to effect it; and such persons should be employed as subordinate agents under the direction of the Rectors of the parishes, or of principal Missionaries of the Church of England.

(Signed) F. CLARKE