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***A Rare Eighteenth-Century Tract in
 Defense of Slavery in Barbados:
 The Thoughts of the Rev. John Duke,
 Curate of St. Michael***

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In the *Barbados Gazette*, or *General Intelligencer*, 15-19 March 1788 an advertisement appeared for a work that was then “in the press” but which would only be published “as soon as 100 copies are subscribed”: *Two Letters on the Treatment of Negroes, in the Island of Barbados, Together with Some Observations on Slavery, and in Defence of the African Trade, In Answer to some late publications in England highly injurious to both Merchant and Planter, addressed to the Rev. Tho. Lyttleton*. The author, the Barbadian-born John Duke, then in his early thirties, identified himself as the Curate of St. Michael and assured readers that the work would be “printed in neat type, and on good paper,” at the price of 2s, 6d.¹ Subscriptions were to be taken by Thomas W. Perch, “at the Gazette Printing Office.” Shortly thereafter, in the *Gazette* of 12-16 April, 1788, readers were informed that the work in question would, indeed, be published “on Monday, the 21st Instant,” and were also notified that “the encouragement already given to the above work has induced the publisher to print 500 copies; and as the subject is of the utmost consequence to this island, and the rest of the sugar colonies, he flatters himself the sale will be equal to his expectations.” The work continued to be advertised in the April and early May issues of the *Gazette*, but readers were now notified that the item was “now selling, by Thomas-Wilmott Perch,” at the *Gazette*.²

After decades of working with published and manuscript sources relating to Barbados history, I have only recently become aware of this work.³ It does not appear to have ever been cited by scholars working in West Indian history or Atlantic slavery, and it is not

listed in standard bibliographic works such as Ragatz’s well-known Guide, or Joseph Sabin’s massive compilation of Americana.⁴ Moreover, I know of only one existing copy, although there may be more in yet unidentified locales since 500 copies were initially printed – as the 1788 *Gazette* advertisement indicated. Whatever the case, this unique copy, discovered through the on-line English Short Title Catalogue, is located in the Wren Library at Trinity College, Cambridge University, whose permission to consult this pamphlet is herewith acknowledged.

This brief article does not attempt to evaluate Duke’s argument in defense of slavery and the highly sanitized and idealized picture he gives of the lives of enslaved Barbadians, the conditions under which they lived, and his distorted view of the African societies from which their ancestors came. Rather, I present a summary of this rare pamphlet as a contribution to the historiography of slavery in the West Indies and in an effort make known to a wider audience a resource that, as far as I am aware, has hitherto escaped notice by scholars and bibliographers of early West Indian history and slavery. Duke’s views reflect those held by the Barbadian plantocracy and its ideological allies both in and outside the island who defended the slave system and justified the enslavement of Africans to serve the economic needs of the sugar colonies. The historical context within which this tract was written was the increasing and intensifying debate in Britain and the British Parliament concerning the abolition of the African slave trade.

Duke’s twenty-eight-page tract is comprised of three parts plus a brief introduction: the first part, Letter I, is dated Bridgetown, 19 October 1787 and is addressed to the Rev. Thomas Lyttleton⁵; the second part, Letter II, is dated Bridgetown, 2 March 1788, and is also addressed to Lyttleton. These two letters constitute about 85 percent of the tract. The third section is a brief post-script, dated 31 March 1788.

Duke dedicates his work to the “Merchants and Planters” of Barbados with whom he identifies as “their affectionate friend and countryman.” Although not originally intended for publication, the letters were written “with a view of removing many of those prejudices which have been hastily taken up by writers in England against the proprietors of Negroes in the West-Indies; and those concerned in the African trade.”

In his first letter, Duke stresses that he is writing so as “to rectify some mistakes, which seem too much to prevail, concerning the treatment of slaves” in Barbados. People in Britain who have critically written about slavery in the West Indies are “totally

unacquainted with the customs and manners of these distant colonies" and "have not altogether been descriptive of the real and actual condition of the coloured race" in Barbados in particular. Here Duke specifically refers to the Anglican minister, the Reverend James Ramsay who in 1784 had published his now classic criticism of West Indian slavery and the treatment of slaves.⁶ Although Duke feels that Ramsay had "been less severe on the Barbadians for their treatment of slaves, than to the proprietors in other islands," nonetheless the "allegations" he has made "may form impressions of an unfavourable nature."

Duke readily agrees that the "yoke" of slavery should be "as light and easy as possible," but, he stresses, that "in a country like . . . [Barbados] there is no possibility of doing without persons of this class, tho at the same time I think that it is as much incumbent on us to humanize and improve their natures as to make them valuable to us merely by their services." In Barbados, he writes, echoing the sentiments of many of the self-satisfied and self-congratulatory defenders of the island's slavery, "our slaves are as happy as circumstances can possibly admit. Those resident on plantations are in general well fed and clothed; when sick they are taken proper care of, attended daily by an apothecary and where cases require by both surgeons and physicians, and not put to work till perfectly recovered. Their daily work is not so laborious, as hath been represented. In many estates," he continues, "they have Saturday afternoon and except in crop-time are never kept at work later than sun-setting. The whole of Sunday is at their own disposal, which they devote either to the cultivation of their lands, on which each Negroe has generally a good house, visiting their friends, selling their produce or, the better sort of them in frequenting and joining in religious duties."

Continuing with his idyllic portrayal of Barbadian slavery, Duke stresses that if Lyttleton could only see "the Negroes in [Bridgetown], see their dress, and mode of living you would not call them slaves. Having every encouragement from their owners, they may be said to enjoy more of the sweets of life than many of the whites themselves." The island's slave laws, Duke finds, are lenient and fair and that "in capital cases (of murder or felony) they have as great advantages or at least as fair a trial as the whites themselves." In brief, the way slaves are treated in Barbados is "far different" from the way in which it has been "represented by those . . . who cannot be allowed to be competent judges."

In common with other defenders of West Indian slavery, a comparison is then made between the condition of Barbados slaves

and European peasants, the latter being found to be worse off and "equally if not more ignorant than our Negroes in general." They are "free subjects," to be sure, but are they in "a happier situation than our Negroes"?

"Are they not equally slaves to their employers, as Negroes are to their owners. Have they when unable to work for their daily bread, that support our Negroes have? Are they attended like them in sickness, without knowing and feeling the expences attending such melancholy seasons? It is true they are not liable to corporal correction, but it is true that they are obliged to be subservient to the caprice of their landlords and employers, or else be driven from their habitations with a train of helpless infants attending them."

In brief, stating a position that was ultimately satisfying to many West Indian slaveowners, "our Negroes are in a preferable condition to the peasants at home, and... they actually enjoy more of the comforts of life."

Having laid out his case on the beneficial treatment of West Indian slaves, Duke then forwards another argument that was commonly used by West Indian interests: slavery is a necessity because "our sugar colonies cannot do without such useful hands." He further stresses that when slaves "fall into the hands of humane and worthy proprietors, bondage is only a name and that the yoke is not so galling as hath been represented by our distant brethren."

Duke also provides a brief and ethnocentric case for the Christianization of the enslaved, at a time when such views were not widely held among Barbadian slaveholders:

"want of capacity cannot be alleged against the blacks. In general, they possess quick parts and nature seems to have bestowed her gifts on them with a liberal hand. It cannot be doubted that where the seeds of piety and virtue are sown in them at an early age much good fruit may, in time, be produced; and if not the present, yet future generations will experience the good effects arising from an early infusion of good principles and morals."

In Letter II, Duke addresses the Atlantic slave trade itself and arguments then being considered by the British Parliament for its abolition. Duke's views on Africa follow the familiar lines of the period (which, one might add, persist in many quarters in the

present-day) that paint a highly negative picture of pre-colonial African societies. Such views stress, for example, that in Africa people were subjected to all kinds of violence and wars, and that Africans themselves enslaved other Africans. Thus, despite slavery in the West Indies, the enslaved are more justly treated than their brethren are in Africa where they are vulnerable to murder and torture. Duke asks, "will not the same scene of savage slaughter be exhibited in Africa... should this commerce be annihilated? The answer is obvious." Thus, there is a continuing advantage to Africans, Duke argues, to being brought to the colonies where their lives are "infinitely for the better" than in Africa. In Barbados "they soon become humanized and civilized. [In Africa] they wear only the resemblance of the human form and carry about with them the savage brutality which puts them on a level with the brute creation. Here [in Barbados], reason soon begins to unfold her powers, and they both feel and find themselves men."

To further enlighten those who do not know the West Indies, Duke points out "that many Negroes obtain their freedom... as a reward for their fidelity or from the partiality of their owners," that "many" of the free negroes in Bridgetown own property and follow the trades and huckstering "and are well treated, even though many of them "are too indolent to exert themselves, suffer more distress than when they were slaves; and after all it cannot be said that in general, freedom makes them either happier or better."

In ending Letter II, Duke specifically turns to the bill for the abolition of slave trade before Parliament, and voices the very common argument of the period concerning the importance of the sugar colonies to Britain: "Of what value will our lands be," he asks, "if we are deprived of the necessary means of cultivating them"? And concludes "that the abolition of the African trade is one of the most pernicious steps Parliament can adopt, either upon national or colonial principles."

The approximately four-page post-script, dated 31 March 1788, continues the themes delineated above, but specifically rebuts three writers who had been critical, in one form or another, of West Indian slavery: an unidentified author, the English clergyman Rev. Thomas Cooper, and the Barbadian-born Rev. Robert Boucher Nicholls. Nicholls, it can be noted, lived in Barbados during his youth, but was educated in England. He returned to Barbados in 1768-70 where he lived on a plantation, and then returned to England where he published a tract critical of West Indian planters.⁷

In the late eighteenth century it was rare for white Barbadians to formally publish their views on slavery and the slave trade (they

did, however, express themselves in newspaper letters and articles, Assembly and Council debates, private letters etc.), but Duke was not alone in how the island's defenders of slavery articulated their position. In fact, by what appears to have been a coincidence, during the same year, and approximately six weeks after Duke published his tract, another Barbadian clergyman, Henry Evans Holder, published in London a similar, albeit slightly more elaborate, defense of slavery and the slave trade. Holder also focused on Barbados, "with which, by birth and residence, I am especially connected, and from whence I can derive facts, which have fallen within the reach of my own knowledge and experience."⁸ Whether or not they were aware of each other's work, both Holder and Duke relied on scriptures and defended their white Barbadian brethren against criticisms of British abolitionists. In so doing they gave voice to and supported the views of those in Barbados and elsewhere who defended the maintenance of the slave society and rationalized the enslavement of Africans and their descendants.

NOTES

1. The Rev. John Duke was christened in November 1756 in St. Thomas parish. After his studies in England, the Bishop of London licensed him to serve in the American colonies; this was done in August 1779, and the license was endorsed in June 1783. It is uncertain when Duke became curate of St. Michael, but he was appointed parish rector in 1790, roughly two years after publication of his tract. He became rector of Christ Church in 1795 or 1796 and died in June 1803.

John Duke belonged to an old Barbadian family that was particularly prominent in the eighteenth century. For example, William Duke was clerk of the Assembly from 1735 to 1765. Other family members were clergymen, including William's eldest son, also named William, rector of St. Thomas (1758-1786) and the Assembly chaplain (1766-1786); he owned Duke's plantation in St. Thomas. Also, Thomas Duke, rector of St. Andrew at least in the early 1770s, and Henry Duke was Solicitor General and represented St. Michael in the Assembly. All were slaveholders as was typical of their social class in Barbados. The Dukes ultimately descended from one Robert Duke, born ca. 1635, perhaps in Exeter, England.

Materials on John Duke and the Duke family have been derived from Henry J. Cadbury, "Clergymen Licensed to Barbados, 1694-1811", *JBMHS*, vol. 15 (1947), pp. 62-69; also, *JBMHS*, vol. 3 (1935), p. 33; *ibid.*, Vol. 14, p. 111; and from information provided by Ernest M. Wiltshire and Ronald Hughes (personal communications).

2. At the time, Perch was editor and owner of the *Barbados Gazette*; founded in 1731, it was the island's earliest newspaper. Perch had started his printing business in Barbados in 1787, took over the *Gazette* shortly thereafter and continued as its publisher until his death in 1792; the paper continued publishing until at least 1797. See E.M. Shilstone, "Some Notes on Early Printing Presses and Newspapers in Barbados", *JBMHS*, vol. 26 (1958), pp. 23-27; Jerome S. Handler, *A Guide to Source Materials for the Study of Barbados History, 1627-1834* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), pp. 116-17; and *ibid. Supplement to a Guide to Source Materials for the Study of Barbados History, 1627-1834* (Providence, Rhode Island, The John Carter Brown Library and the Barbados Museum and Historical Society, 1991), p.49.
3. Handler, *Guide to Source Materials*, 1971 and *ibid.*, Supplement, 1991.
4. Lowell J. Ragatz, *A Guide for the Study of British Caribbean History, 1763-1834* (Washington, D.C., 1932); Lawrence S. Thompson, *The New Sabin; books described by Joseph Sabin and his successors* (Troy, New York, Whitston Publishing, 1974-84); John Edgar Molnar, *Author-title index to Joseph Sabin's Dictionary of books relating to America* (Metuchen, New Jersey, Scarecrow Press, 1974).
5. I have been unable to identify Thomas Lyttleton.
6. James Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (London, 1784).
7. *A letter to the Treasurer of the Society Instituted for the Purpose of Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London, 1787; new edition, 1788). Nicholls argues, in common with many other abolitionists, that planters would not suffer economically with the abolition of the slave trade for it would compel them to treat their slaves better; if treated more humanely the slave population would increase naturally and thus would provide sufficient labor for the plantations. The tract was written while he was Dean of Middleham in Yorkshire, England (see Handler, *Guide*, 1971, p. 51; also p. 107). Thomas Cooper was an active opponent of the slave trade and the author of several tracts on the subject (see Ragatz, *Guide*, p. 492).
8. Henry Evans Holder, *A Short Essay on the Subject of Negro Slavery, with particular reference to the Island of Barbadoes* (London, 1788). I say coincidence because neither Duke nor Holder mentions the other's work and I assume that neither was aware that the other was publishing a tract. Holder's introduction is dated Barbadoes, June 1, 1788, and his essay is well known

and relatively widely available. Like Duke, Holder was also a member of an old Barbadian plantation family and had inherited Joe's River plantation in St. Joseph. (For a précis of the Holder's Short Essay, see Handler, *Guide*, 1971, p. 52.)

In 1792, Holder published another tract defending "West-Indian Merchants and Planters" against abolitionist criticisms, and specifically addressed himself, as a rebuttal, to J. Majoribanks's *Slavery: an essay in Verse* (Edinburgh, 1792). In his introduction to *Fragments of a Poem*, intended to have been written in consequence of reading Major Majoribanks's *Slavery* (Bath, 1792), Holder (at the time, residing at Redland, near Bristol) is incensed at the "infamous attacks... against the West-Indians, by the misguided and the licentious" in England. Stressing that his 1788 pamphlet "proved... that slavery was positively and literatim countenanced by the Levitical law," he challenges anyone who attempts to refute his arguments, that they must "refer to the Hebrew original of the texts I cite." He repeats some of his earlier arguments, viz., that Africans are much better off morally and intellectually in the West Indies than in Africa, and he remains convinced that "after three years residence in the islands... not one in one hundred Africans would choose to return to their native continent." He also stresses that West Indian planters "have nothing to do with the reprehensible part of the slave trade business," that is, they neither trade in Africa nor transport Africans to the New World: "This is the work of holy Englishmen!" He argues that West Indian slave holders do not treat their slaves as animals ("brutes"), as abolitionists maintain; rather slaves are treated better because slave holders "are interested not merely in the lives, but in the offspring of our Negroes, which is not the case with our mules and horses." In all, "West-Indians may have their faults and follies," Holder concludes, "but I contend that they are by nature more humane than the generality of the inhabitants of... [England]."