



BRILL

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE 93 (2019) 201–230



brill.com/nwig

An Intolerance of Idleness

British Disaster “Relief” in the Caribbean 1831–1907

Oscar Webber

London School of Economics

o.webber@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

Despite the fact that disasters, usually induced by hurricanes, were a near-annual experience in the nineteenth-century British-controlled Caribbean, the immediate response of white elites (plantation owners and colonial officers) to these events has remained largely underexamined. This article fills that lacuna by examining the concerns that, across the long nineteenth century, informed British responses to some of the most devastating nature-induced disasters in this period. Though the damages wrought by these events always necessitated some form of humanitarian relief, across the period 1831–1907 the survival of labor regimes and the plantation economy always remained the paramount concern of British officials. White elites viewed their minority control over colonies in the region as contingent on their ability to make African-Caribbean people labor for them. Consequently, because disasters so often destroyed plantations and other sites of labor, colonial responses to disaster were primarily informed by a desire to coerce the African-Caribbean population back to work. Reflecting a preoccupation with “idleness” that was mirrored in domestic poor relief and disaster relief throughout the British Empire, white elites often attempted to withhold needed foodstuffs and materials for rebuilding from the African-Caribbean population until they re-engaged in labor for the colonial state. This article, through showing that a preoccupation with idleness remained central to colonial disaster response, reveals an underexamined continuity between the eras of slavery and emancipation.

Keywords

Caribbean – slavery – long nineteenth century – postemancipation – disaster – relief

Studying disaster response in the British Caribbean permits a unique and new perspective on the continuities between the eras of slavery and emancipation. Broadly speaking, scholars who have examined the postemancipation period have tended to focus on the plantation and what Woodville K. Marshall has termed the “post-emancipation labour problem” (Marshall 2003:115). Those scholars have largely debated whether the formerly enslaved were “pushed” or “pulled” from the plantation after they were emancipated. That said, there has been some agreement that the formerly enslaved population were, after abolition and apprenticeship, able to draw on some new, albeit limited, freedoms. Following the ending of apprenticeship, there appears to have been a gendered diversification of opportunity as men focused on agricultural labor and women, in addition to familial and domestic work, were able to exert some limited independence selling agricultural produce and other items as market traders (Yelvington et al. 2011:301). Although the British still retained a great deal of power, they certainly lost their previously totalizing grip over labor.

It must be said that for those scholars who have posited that the formerly enslaved were able to exert new freedoms there are also those such as Nigel Bolland who have urged for more cautious assessments. Bolland has argued that historians should not paint “too extreme a discontinuity” in African-Caribbean lives “before and after” 1838 (Brereton 2002:8). In the same vein, this article shows that whilst British approaches to disaster relief were never formally codified, there were organizing principles that remained constant, meaning it followed an observable pattern throughout the period 1831–1907. The most prominent organizing principle was white fear of an African-Caribbean population rendered “idle.” When disasters destroyed and disrupted the sites and rhythms of labor, white elites became anxious about the prospect of an idle African-Caribbean population. They feared that, without the disciplining force of labor, this population would mount a challenge to their authority.

Though a large-scale contestation of colonial authority never took place following a disaster in the long nineteenth century, the disruption of labor appears to have always precipitated the fear of one. During the early nineteenth century, successive rebellions in Barbados (1816), Demerara (1823), and Jamaica (1831/32) are a clear reason why this fear remained constant. However, understanding why that fear remained pervasive throughout the long nineteenth century is only possible when one considers that, as Bridget Brereton argues, social distance and racial hegemony were crucial “social and cultural weapons” at the disposal of Whites in their fight to maintain their control of the Caribbean colonies without the “buttress of slave ownership” (Brereton 2011:338). Both social distance and racial hegemony were placed under serious stress in the aftermaths of disasters.

The organizing principle at the heart of British "relief" is how this idleness was responded to. Showing a correlation with the punitive traditions of domestic poor relief and practices deployed throughout the Empire, white elites across this period sought to control relief by limiting distribution only to those who engaged in work for the colonial state. Initially, in the early nineteenth century, as domestic poor relief was in the process of evolving, its linkages to colonial disaster relief were less pronounced. In 1834 the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed in Parliament; it emerged out of an ongoing dialog in British society that sought to make work the central determinant of a person's eligibility for relief and to make claiming relief itself an option of last resort. In the Caribbean, limiting relief to those willing to work was seen by Whites as vital because work was conceived of as a disciplining force on an African-Caribbean population rendered idle and whom, without it, might turn against their colonial oppressors. There were rare exceptions where the history of white and African-Caribbean conflict stymied this approach or where cooperation between the groups took place. But, over the long nineteenth century, British responses to disaster increasingly drew on the language of domestic policy toward the poor explicitly. By the end of the nineteenth century, when the British Caribbean experienced a spate of disasters, colonial governors were writing about relief and, through the use of phrases such as "able-bodied," deciding who should and should not receive aid.

In the spirit of *Small Islands, Large Questions*, this article will further broaden our understanding of the postemancipation era by highlighting the underexamined continuities in white elite approaches to disaster relief in both the eras of slavery and notional freedom.¹ Examinations of isolated cases of British disaster relief have been completed by David Lambert (2005:117–84) and Simon Smith (2011 and 2012). In his book on white identity on Barbados, Lambert covers the aftermath of a hurricane that hit the island in 1831 and highlights white preoccupation with an idle African-Caribbean population. Of particular interest is his suggestion that the posthurricane desolation represented a "testing ground for the black capacity for freedom" and that their perceived idleness in that moment reinforced white Barbadian opposition to their freedom (Lambert 2005:182). Lambert's argument is important because it hints at one aspect this article explores in greater detail. Namely, that disasters created disruption temporarily freeing African-Caribbeans from some strictures of colonial con-

1 *Small Islands, Large Questions*, edited by Karen Fog Olwig (1995), is a collection of essays that attempted to broaden out the historiographical focus from the era of slavery to the postemancipation era. This collection also placed emphasis on not just investigating the changing dynamics of plantation labor during the transition between these two eras.

trol and that Whites feared that without the re-imposition of work, change in circumstance could become permanent. Smith, drawing on the concept of vulnerability from the discipline of disaster risk reduction, has taken a more interdisciplinary approach and studied both the disaster response and recovery on St. Vincent in 1812 and 1831. While he makes a valuable contribution to this topic of study, the factors underpinning and shaping British responses to disaster remain underexamined in his work. Though the work of both Lambert and Smith has some overlap with the content of this article, neither has explored the organizing principles and continuities of British relief across the long nineteenth century.

The only scholar to have undertaken a long form study of British Caribbean disaster response is Matthew Mulcahy in his book *Hurricanes and Society in the Greater British Caribbean*. Though the book's temporal focus is the eighteenth century, Mulcahy's work is nonetheless a critical primer for understanding relief in the long nineteenth century. He shows that from when the plantation and enslaved labor became established parts of Caribbean society, for white elites hurricanes began to precipitate fear not just of their own mortality but also of social unrest and ultimately African-Caribbean rebellion (Mulcahy 2006:141–88). Suggesting a continuity from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, Mulcahy shows that to allay those fears, the restoration of the plantations was a frequent postdisaster priority and that their owners were usually the main beneficiaries of financial aid when it was supplied by the British Parliament. Sherry Johnson, in her book *Climate and Catastrophe*, shows that these problems were not unique to the British Caribbean. Disaster triggered similar anxieties in the ruling Spanish colonial class. In the period of Charles IV's rule, colonial officials regularly prioritized political concerns far ahead of humanitarian concerns (Johnson 2011:168–71). Together, though examining different empires, Mulcahy's and Johnson's work gestures toward a common experience of disaster in the colonial Caribbean that instead of bringing societies together exposed their racial, social, and political fault lines.

It is these similarities in the experience of disaster across Caribbean empires that Stuart Schwartz has sought to illuminate in his book *Sea of Storms*. Schwartz's book takes a broad focus both temporally and geographically spanning pre-Columbian experiences through to Hurricane Katrina, and events across the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico. Schwartz covers responses to the Barbadian hurricane of 1831 and draws much the same conclusions as Lambert, namely, that the aftermath of the hurricane gave white elites a vision of what they most feared: "a slave population not subject to their command" (Schwartz 2015:138). However, given that his focus is not specifically on the British, he understandably roots his explanation of these fears, and the repres-

sion meted out to allay them, in the context of the history of slave uprisings in the Caribbean. Schwartz is right to do so, but, as this article shows, it was not the case that the British feared that disasters would provoke uprisings directly. Rather, they feared that, without work, the African-Caribbean would slump into idleness that would in turn lead to them challenging white control. Thus, informed by domestic attitudes to pauperism, the British placed work at the heart of their approach to disaster relief.

Bonham C. Richardson, in his study of Barbados and the Windwards at the end of the nineteenth century, provides an important examination of one of the later disasters considered in this article: the 1898 hurricane that primarily affected Barbados and St. Vincent (Richardson 1997). Richardson's examination of the event is valuable because it shows that Parliamentary aid given to the islands fitted into a larger plan to lift the region out of economic depression. The focus of his work is the political debates that determined the scope of this financial aid and not the responses of those white elites on the ground in Barbados and St. Vincent. This article expands existing coverage of events in the affected islands and illuminates the organizing principles underpinning British relief over the long nineteenth century.

It focuses on the islands which experienced the severest disasters in the long nineteenth century: Barbados, St. Vincent, Dominica, Antigua, and Jamaica. On all these islands white elites were entirely reliant on African-Caribbean plantation labor for their continued extraction of profit. Even when there was a dire need to provide humanitarian relief, the survival of the plantation economy and the labor regime which supported it always remained the paramount concern of British officials. Reflecting preoccupations that were shared throughout Britain, its empire and America, colonial officials focused their energies on returning those who had been rendered idle by the destruction of their sites of labor back to work (Sawislak 1995:69–120). Where other scholars have highlighted this preoccupation in their studies of individual disasters, this article foregrounds the continuity of colonial concerns around idleness.

1 The Intersection of Food, Labor, and Relief

The destruction of their homes, plantations and other sites of labor frequently drove African-Caribbean peoples, in large groups, to the urban centers of colonies searching for food and shelter. For white elites, these mass movements often sparked fear. Large gatherings of African-Caribbean people had always been something to be quickly dispersed lest they pose a threat to white

minority rule. During the period of slavery, enslaved peoples had their freedom of movement constrained by a system of passes that prevented them from leaving their plantation without the permission of the overseer or owner of the plantation. Those found outside of their plantation without a pass were at the very least quickly returned to their owner. When this system of passes ended following Emancipation, police forces were set up throughout the British Caribbean to continue to provide them with a method to disperse gatherings (Bolland 1981:121). Consequently, across the long nineteenth century, white response to disaster usually prioritized preventing large gatherings of the African-Caribbean population, limiting their freedom of movement, and where possible returning them to their traditionally rural places of work. However, this approach had obvious limitations in that whilst it temporarily allayed their fears of insurrection and civil unrest, it alone would not reinstate the status quo they desired; the sites and rhythms of labor remained destroyed. This disruption of normalcy often caused migrations of African-Caribbean people to urban centers bringing about the very gatherings the white elites feared. Furthermore, the damage occasioned by disaster often created specific issues that, beyond the transgressions of informal rules around space and movement, were perceived as threatening the colonial hierarchy.

The region's natural hazards very frequently destroyed not only the plantations and their cane crop, but also the provision grounds allotted to the African-Caribbean population. In most British Caribbean colonies, plantations dominated nearly all arable land and so these provision grounds were an essential source of food for African-Caribbean peoples. Consequently, in nearly all the cases of disaster in the nineteenth century their destruction appeared to have precipitated significant food shortages.² However, the perceived threat posed by this destruction went deeper. The provision ground as well as the plantation was a site of labor and, in the British Caribbean, labor, even after the period of slavery, was perceived as crucial to maintaining control over the African-Caribbean population.

White desire for a cheap and expendable labor force was the reason African peoples were first brought to the region, and centuries of racist rhetoric reinforced that as "property," laboring was their central function in Caribbean society (Beckles 2012:56–67). Thus, disaster, and the destruction of plantations, often created a twofold crisis for white elites. Plantations were both the central

2 Food shortages were reported, and external sources of food were secured after the eruption of La Soufrière in both 1812 and 1902, hurricanes in 1831, 1834, 1866, 1898, and following the Kingston earthquake of 1907.

site for African-Caribbean labor and, as they were also the site of their allotments, their main source of food. Consequently, white elites were faced not only with a population that needed feeding, but one that they could not easily put back to work. Reflecting the need of the white elite to feel in control of the postdisaster situation, across the nineteenth century relief in the Caribbean thus became a process in which the African-Caribbean population was forced back to work to both limit the economic losses of white elites and also "earn" the relief they needed in the form of food and the materials to rebuild their homes.³

The intertwining of labor and relief was by no means unique to British responses to disaster in the Caribbean. It was a joining that occurred with purpose throughout the Empire. Work schemes were deployed during the Irish famine and in India throughout the nineteenth century (Davis 2000; Ó Gráda 2010:214). In Ireland, the starving were employed to build roads, quays, and make other improvements to infrastructure. Similar work schemes were implemented in India, but in a significantly more punitive manner; to receive rations the starving were made to submit to living militarized work camps (Davis 2001:38–41). Nor was it unique to the Empire—the idea that participation in work schemes was the most just way of determining the eligibility of the poor for relief was an attitude that had long resided at the heart of Britain's domestic approach to poor relief and became its guiding principle following the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. Unlike in Ireland and India, no labor camps were built in the Caribbean and, despite the frequency of disasters, in particular hurricanes, the British never formalized any plans of response to these hazards. Hurricanes were not even mentioned in the documents written by the Colonial Office to aid governors preparing to take up positions in the region and adaptations such as the development of hurricane shelters, despite proven success, were abandoned.⁴

Whilst white elites prepared little for disaster, across the long nineteenth century their responses to disaster often unfolded in the same way. In practice, reflecting a punitive approach to domestic poor relief, they often made relief for the suffering African-Caribbeans conditional on their participation in

3 This article is concerned with relief as it emerged in the immediate aftermath of disaster and so, even though Britain did on occasion provide financial relief (notably after the Great Hurricane of 1780 and the Barbadian hurricane of 1831) it usually arrived after protracted negotiation. Consequently, when the term relief is used in this article it primarily refers to the foodstuffs and building materials that were so often in short supply after these events.

4 Mulcahy 2006:128–29. The National Archives (hereafter TNA), London, CO 260/3 (St Vincent), Correspondence, original-Secretary of State, Untitled file, an instruction guide for the incoming Governor of St Vincent, 1783.

work. This response to disaster was intended to reassert the “normal” order in which African-Caribbeans labored for Whites. In the long nineteenth century, this approach first took shape following the Barbadian hurricane of 1831.

On August 10, 1831 Barbados was hit by a devastating hurricane which destroyed nearly all the island’s plantations and left the enslaved population without shelter or food.⁵ In their communications with London, colonial officials wrote as if famine threatened all on the island; they wrote that they were “destitute of the common necessities of life” and other eye witnesses recorded that the island was “menaced with the horrors of pestilence and famine.”⁶ Despite the supposed threat of universal famine, food supplies were arriving at the island; not only were they not being distributed, they were actively being turned away. From a report written on September 2, we know that provisions arrived at Barbados from the Berbice region of British-controlled Guiana. From the outset, these supplies were intended to be sold and not distributed freely to the inhabitants. However, these much-needed supplies never made it to Barbados’s merchants and instead were turned away by John Drake, the planter and council member charged with overseeing relief. In a report to the council, Drake explained his actions saying that “[these supplies] were not required at Barbados either by the troops or by the inhabitants, nor at any other station.” He further reported that “they could not be housed anywhere, the sending of them back was the most advantageous mode that could be adopted for the public interest.” In consequence of this, Drake returned what he referred to as “wholly unnecessary and unsolicited” provisions knowing full well that they would spoil on their return to the Berbice region.⁷ There is nothing in Drake’s correspondence that lays out a clear motive for his actions. However, at the very least his actions implicitly suggest that he did not consider it an appropriate course of action to simply distribute the food directly from the boat it arrived on. Furthermore, that he felt the provisions had to be “housed” suggests he had a desire to exert some level of control over who could access them.

Considering the famine conditions reported directly after the hurricane, Drake’s decision is striking. Turning away needed relief was not a common course of action prior to 1831 and nor would it be after; there are only two instances of it happening later in the nineteenth century. In 1837, Antigua’s legislature turned down the delivery of water from Barbados so as not to harm the

5 Editor of the “West Indian,” *Account of the Fatal Hurricane*, p. 104.

6 TNA, CO 31/51, Barbados, General Assembly, September 6, 1831; Editor of the “West Indian,” *Account of the Fatal Hurricane*, p. 6.

7 TNA, T1/4395 Long Papers, bundle 852, part 1: West Indies Relief, Drake to Stewart, February 17, 1832.

island's "honor" (Flannigan 1844:192–93). In 1831, there is little suggestion that the island's honor was at stake. It is also noteworthy that Drake, though lacking a place to "house" the provisions, did not simply send them on to nearby St. Vincent where, having been affected by the same hurricane, planters were reporting that "famine [was] staring [its] inhabitants in the face."⁸ However, like on Barbados, whilst Vincentian planters were raising the alarm about the possibility of famine in their communications with London, one of them, J. Colquhuon, reported that, for those with money, there were still some "scanty" supplies held by the merchants.⁹

That on Barbados Drake was comfortable returning the provisions suggests that whilst the provision grounds of the enslaved were destroyed, white elites like those on St. Vincent had some other means of feeding themselves. The remaining question is then why would planters on both islands report impending famine conditions if Vincentian merchants held provisions and Barbados was able to turn away supplies? This is in part explained by the fact that planters sought to exaggerate the direness of their postdisaster circumstances to enhance the chance that they would receive financial aid from Parliament.¹⁰ Perhaps above all though, had Drake simply distributed the provisions freely the enslaved population would have had little incentive to labor for white elites.

Distanced from the impact of food shortages, white elites prioritized returning the enslaved population to work and restoring the plantation economy. Eight days after the hurricane, Governor James Lyon issued a proclamation in the *Barbados Globe and Colonial Advocate* that ordered householders who owned slaves to search for them if they had left their plantations without permission and put them to work cleaning Bridgetown's streets.¹¹ He also, in a prelude to what would become common practice across the Caribbean post-emancipation, ordered Whites to take any African-Caribbean person guilty of vagrancy and put them to work at public works until they were picked up by an overseer or their owner.¹²

In his communications with London, he explained the actions he took as necessary because "without guidance" the enslaved were "always idle."¹³ For

8 *Royal St. Vincent Gazette*, August 18, 1831.

9 *Royal St. Vincent Gazette*, August 18, 1831.

10 This trend toward over exaggeration is noted by Mulcahy (2006) and it continued throughout the nineteenth century. The planters of St. Vincent in particular were known for their "absurd" and "hyperbolic" reports; Parliamentary Papers (1831), House of Commons [197], p. 18, Boson to Goderich, August 18, 1831.

11 *Barbados Globe and Colonial Advocate*, August 18, 1831.

12 *Barbados Globe and Colonial Advocate*, August 23, 1831.

13 Parliamentary Papers (1831), House of Commons [197], West Indies. Copies of dispatches

the work of clearing roads, burying dead livestock and destroying putrefying vegetable matter, wages were paid, which functioned as a form of relief because they facilitated the purchase of needed provisions. However, within what appears as a straightforward attempt to restart African-Caribbean labor and market exchange, there was nuance to the colonial approach to relief. Wages for this work were not paid at a flat rate, but rather at different increments reflecting the usefulness of an individual to the colonial state. Day laborers were to be paid two shillings and six pence per day, common carpenters and masons three shillings and nine pence, and master workmen six shillings and three pence.¹⁴ The base amount of two shillings and six pence appears to reflect the recommendations of the Jamaican consolidated Slave Act of 1792 (an act intended to be adopted by other colonies), which bound planters to provide provisions of that value for enslaved peoples without the land to feed themselves (Edwards 1793:190). It is worth noting that wages of this value were comparatively low compared to the average wage of a British agricultural worker in this same year (in 1831, the average wage of an agricultural worker was eleven shillings a day) (Bowley 1900:34). On Barbados, in normal circumstances, a single pound of fish or pork would have roughly cost a third of a day laborer's wage at these rates (Bayley 1833:149). What is more, those on these wages would have struggled to purchase food given that its price would have been inflated by the hurricane-induced shortages. Whilst these wages would have had limited benefits for those earning them, such an approach, by separating out workers and advantaging some ahead of others, would have been effective at diffusing discontent with this mode of relief. This approach also benefitted white elites by rebuilding the complex hierarchy of labor upon which their minority control rested (Heuman 1997:138–68).

Lyon appears to have believed that those in the colonial office were as concerned with African-Caribbean idleness as he and his fellow colonists were. He stressed in his reports that though the enslaved had been idle, his actions had rendered them “perfectly obedient to their masters,” and that both black and white people were working together with “firmness and resignation.”¹⁵ Lyon reporting anything other than peaceful cooperation would have obviously caused those in Britain to reflect on his ability to perform his role. As the days passed following the hurricane, Lyon's dispatches continued in a

from Barbados, St Vincent and St Lucia, relating to the late hurricane in the West Indies, p. 2, Lyon to Goderich, August 13, 1831.

14 *Barbados Globe and Colonial Advocate*, August 23, 1831.

15 Editor of the “West Indian,” *Account of the Fatal Hurricane*, pp. 77 and 117.

tone that highlighted the cooperation of those on the island. On August 13, he wrote that "all classes and all colors vied with each other in their haste to contribute their mite towards relieving the wants of the poor and houseless."¹⁶ What Lyon was not reporting was that, despite the energies directed toward coercing the African-Caribbean population back into labor, this effort was not entirely successful and given that it remained the paramount concern of white elites, more extreme steps than simply limiting access to relief were taken.

In an eyewitness account titled *An Account of the Fatal Hurricane by which Barbados Suffered in 1831*, the author contradicts Lyon's dispatches by recording that throughout the island there was large-scale plunder which, if left unchecked, would have "involved this wretched country in all the miseries of famine."¹⁷ Colonel Hinds, the owner of the Spring Garden estate, reported that authority was totally disregarded. Similarly, at the Black Bess plantation the enslaved people were supposedly "very disorderly and using threats."¹⁸ This perceived pattern of disobedience repeated itself round the island and in response, Whites were given carte-blanche power to flog any enslaved peoples who tried to persuade their fellows that they need not work. The violence peaked when an enslaved man was shot dead for striking a soldier.¹⁹

To the white elites witnessing these scenes, they must have appeared as a manifestation of what they most feared; the disruption to normal working patterns and the privation caused by the hurricane was precipitating challenges to their authority. However, there is little to suggest that the perceived transgressions of African-Caribbeans against white rule constituted sparks of a potential rebellion. The insight provided by the author of the *Account* into the morale of the island's population would suggest that an organized rebellion was far from the minds of most:

The heart of each was surcharged with distress, the voice was paralyzed and denied the power of utterance; neither could congratulate the other on the safety of his life, or recite his disconsolate tale; but the silent, convulsive grasp of the hand emphatically expressed "my affliction is greater than I can bear!"²⁰

16 Parliamentary Papers (1831), House of Commons [197], p. 2, Lyon to Goderich, August 13, 1831.

17 Editor of the "West Indian," *Account of the Fatal Hurricane*, p. 117.

18 Editor of the "West Indian," *Account of the Fatal Hurricane*, p. 118.

19 Editor of the "West Indian," *Account of the Fatal Hurricane*, p. 121.

20 Editor of the "West Indian," *Account of the Fatal Hurricane*, p. 39.

In consequence of such descriptions, the discontent that erupted on various plantations appears more as a manifestation of despair from an oppressed people who, having endured the hurricane and the immense personal losses it brought, were resistant to the oppression of slavery being so rapidly re-asserted over their drastically altered circumstances. The absence of rebellious intent is further evidenced by the fact that besides their idleness, their recorded crimes were largely limited to the reaping of any corn left untouched by the hurricane.²¹ Indeed, in the aftermath of the hurricane, the enslaved people of Barbados appeared to have done little besides scavenge food from the island's ruins.²²

The island's white elites did also attempt to hasten the return to normal working patterns by trying to make what appeared initially as good-natured appeals to the African-Caribbean population. A planter, Sir Reynold Alleyne, dispatched around the island to quell unrest, attempted to placate enslaved laborers by rhetorically undoing some of the racial otherization that normally separated Whites from African-Caribbeans. On arriving at a plantation, Alleyne said he came to the enslaved as a "friend" and informed them that it was only due to their behavior that he was induced to bring a military force to restore order. In an attempt to soothe discontent, he argued that the hurricane's damage created a "common distress" that "involved both master and slave" and due to which, like his own enslaved charges, they should act with "obedience and attention."²³ He further stressed that the "uproar of the elements could not sever the tie that existed between them and their owners, but that it ought, if possible, to have united them more strongly."²⁴ Alleyne's remarks would prove to be disingenuous, but that he made them is suggestive of the level of concern white elites had for their safety in the wake of the hurricane and the emphasis they placed on labor as a remedy for challenges to their authority.

This attempt on the behalf of the white elites to bring the African-Caribbean population on side and quickly reinstate normal laboring routines was not a new tactic. In his study of the 1816 rebellion, Lambert shows that one of the initial responses of the island's acting president was to issue a proclamation that threatened summary punishments for all involved. This proclamation was then followed by a second that was, in Lambert's terms, "more conciliatory in tone and policy" and offered a pardon to any enslaved peoples who were not "principle instigators" of the rebellion (Lambert 2005:124). Lambert argues that this switch in rhetoric was representative of the desire of white elites to restore

21 Editor of the "West Indian," *Account of the Fatal Hurricane*, p. 116.

22 Editor of the "West Indian," *Account of the Fatal Hurricane*, p. 120.

23 Editor of the "West Indian," *Account of the Fatal Hurricane*, p. 119.

24 Editor of the "West Indian," *Account of the Fatal Hurricane*, p. 119.

the hierarchy between master and slave (Lambert 2005:125). In 1831, this rhetorical tactic was used again; Lyon's initial proclamation struck a harsh tone, but as shown by Alleyne's address, those actively involved in quelling the unrest employed a more conciliatory tone to achieve their ultimate goal of restoring the "normal" racial hierarchy.

Alleyne's conciliatory tone was in reality a thin facade. It was a cover that would be quickly dropped when it did not achieve its intended aim. The author of the *Account* tells us that this address was met with "insolent language" and agitation from certain "ringleaders."²⁵ As a show of his and the wider white elite's true intentions, Alleyne had the most disobedient offenders brought forward and punished with fifty lashes. Quelling white fears of a contestation of their authority through the re-establishment of normal labor routines assumed greatest paramountcy. In 1831, the link between work and relief was clear. Needed relief was turned away thus ensuring that African-Caribbeans were incentivized to labor for Whites and when they did not, violence was meted out on them until they did.

2 Postemancipation Continuities

Though slavery ended in 1833, plantation agriculture did not nor did its dominance of arable land. Though exports of sugar from the British Caribbean stagnated in the period 1807–33, the plantation remained the central way in which the British envisaged deriving profit from the region (Northrup 1995:18). The system of apprenticeship that replaced slavery ensured the temporary survival of the plantation because it gave planters the right to at least 40 hours a week of unpaid labor.²⁶ The severity of the white response on Barbados in 1831 had been legal because the recipients of the violence were enslaved peoples. With African-Caribbeans receiving greater legal protections via the apprenticeship system, some colonial legislatures appear to have been cognizant of how this might limit their control over labor in a postdisaster situation. In Jamaica, they tried to ensure continued control through legal change. In 1833, Governor Howe Brown in his proclamation to newly made apprentices made it clear that despite new regulations that limited the amount of work they could be made to do to following a hurricane or an earthquake a plantation owner could require them to work for longer to ensure crops were harvested.²⁷ Even where such legal

25 Editor of the "West Indian," *Account of the Fatal Hurricane*, p. 120.

26 Editor of the "West Indian," *Account of the Fatal Hurricane*, p. 19.

27 Parliamentary Papers (1837), House of Commons [521], Papers in explanation of the mea-

changes were not made, the plantation's survival as the central hub of labor and thus white control meant that, after disasters, its restoration remained the primary concern of white elites.

In 1834, a hurricane hit the island of Dominica and destroyed nearly all the plantations, the coffee crop, and half the sugar crop. The population was largely reduced to scavenging food from the ground where it had been uprooted but otherwise survived the impact of the hurricane winds. The reverend of St. George parish, George Clarke, said that these foodstuffs would only last a fortnight, or at most three weeks, before famine was imminent.²⁸ In these circumstances, frustration on the part of the planters with African-Caribbean idleness quickly emerged; in a report sent to London, planter, Dugald Laidlaw, wrote:

The rich, respectable founders the planters [have] with every disposition sought to assist [the laborers] but that ever since the hurricane, the negroes have been behaving ill, and have done little towards rebuilding their houses—on which they have been exclusively employed. Finding that my brother was nearly dead from being buried in the ruins of the great house, they robbed and plundered everything they could lay their hands upon.²⁹

Though not explicitly suggestive of a concern about a full-scale rebellion, Laidlaw's letter makes an implicit link between the inattentiveness of the African-Caribbean population to labor and the transgressions against Whites and white property. From this quote we can also begin to see that these concerns were not unique to Barbados nor to the period of slavery. On an island whose white minority were dependent on African-Caribbean labor for their profit, these concerns were always going to rear their head. That said, despite Laidlaw's obvious distaste for the behavior of his apprenticed laborers he noted that feeding them was an "unavoidable expense"; no doubt "unavoidable" because it was essential to restarting the plantation economy.³⁰

Like Barbados's planters in 1831, the planters of Dominica responded to the disruption caused by disaster by attempting to put African-Caribbean peo-

asures adopted by his Majesty's Government for giving effect to the act for The Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Colonies: Part 1. Jamaica, 1833–1835, p. 43.

28 TNA, T1/4397 Long Papers, bundle 852, part 3: West Indies relief, Extract of a letter sent by Rev. George Clarke to (recipient not given), September 20, 1834.

29 TNA, T1/4397, Colquhoun to Rice, October 2, 1834.

30 TNA, T1/4397, Colquhoun to Rice, October 2, 1834.

ples back to work. As Laidlaw writes, apprenticed laborers were employed in the reconstruction of their own homes—something which perhaps reflected a slight easing of colonial repression when compared with the more general work tasks set on Barbados in 1831. However, the apprentices appeared to have chafed at these orders, preferring instead to focus on the potentially more pressing need to feed themselves. One Dominican planter wrote that his workers implored him to let them attend to their cassava which was beginning to rot and was, in his words, their "best stand by, as it may be preserved for any length of time."³¹

No doubt because the African-Caribbean population was now apprenticed and not enslaved, they were not subjected to anything like the harsh ordinances that Governor Lyon issued in the aftermath of the Barbadian hurricane of 1831. That said, the communications of the planters of Dominica show that they were still concerned by African-Caribbean idleness. However, unlike their Barbadian counterparts, they appear to have understood that engaging in coercion when foodstuffs were so low could have fomented discontent that would have threatened their control. Over time, even those such as Laidlaw, who was initially reticent to engage with relief, wrote that he and other planters had begun doing what they could to feed African-Caribbean children.³²

In 1831, Whites first tried limiting access to relief to coerce African-Caribbeans back into labor and then deployed force against those who resisted. In 1834, force was not used, but as can be seen in the rhetoric of Laidlaw, white preoccupation with African-Caribbean idleness remained. James Corlet, speaker of the island's assembly wrote of the need to have Dominica's roads cleared immediately to allow the laborers to leave the capital and return to their places of work.³³ In a further contrast with 1831, the white elites of Dominica responded to the hurricane of 1834 with some compassion; Governor Evan Macgregor called upon the island's legislature to provide immediate shelter to all those without homes. The difference between responses in 1831 and 1834 is in part also explained by the fact that after extended conflict with Maroons, the power of the island's planters to violently enforce their will was weakened (Craton 1982:232).

In 1831 and 1834 the proximate cause of conflict between white elites and the African-Caribbean population was food shortages. When, on occasion, post-

31 TNA, T1/4397, Extract of letter from Rosalie Estate contained within Laidlaw to Gregg, October 2, 1834.

32 TNA, T1/4397, Colquhoun to Rice, October 2, 1834.

33 TNA, CO 71/78 (Dominica) Correspondence, Original-Secretary of State: Despatches; Offices and Individuals, James Corlet to Evan Macgregor, September 27, 1834.

disaster circumstances were comparatively less desperate they did not immediately change white elite preoccupation with labor and control, but did, over time, foster less punitive responses to disaster. In 1843, an earthquake shook Antigua leveling much of the capital St. Johns and destroying plantations throughout the island. Typically, white elites initially feared that the destruction would drive the African-Caribbean population to commit widespread pillage and thus they turned to established patterns of response.³⁴ Governor Charles Fitzroy summoned the magistrates, merchants and principal inhabitants to the Government House where measures were resolved upon for the security of property, special constables sworn in, and a detachment of the 47th Regiment marched down to the Police Quarters to assist in cases of “necessity.”³⁵ Yet, the following day Fitzroy reported that “with only trifling exceptions no attempt at plunder has been made.”

The lack of the perceived threat was such that Governor Fitzroy rode through Antigua’s streets and country to assess the damage himself. Fitzroy went on to report that “the conduct of the laboring population has been most praiseworthy.”³⁶ However, most striking is that, now in the receipt of wages, laborers could have advantaged themselves by raising the price of their labor, but they did not. In fact, representatives of that class stated that they would not use the opportunity presented to them.³⁷ Without colonial coercion all classes were reported as having participated in at least the clearing of streets, disposal of rubbish, and the pulling down of buildings. When compared to 1831 and 1834, such cooperation appears miraculous, but the explanation is simple; unlike those hurricanes, the earthquake did not rip crops from the soil and leave them rotting in the deluge that followed. In 1843, there were no food shortages, recovery was difficult, but the immediate survival of the people was ensured and so desperation and thus tension did not rise. White elites found no threat to their authority and so punitive responses like those deployed in 1831 did not manifest.

Though cooperation reigned in 1843, it is still important to note that the initial response of white elites was to deploy force. Postslavery, it remained the case that disaster sparked fear in the ruling class, not just because of the

34 Parliamentary Papers (1843), House of Commons [441], Antigua. Papers Relative to the Earthquake in the West Indies [Antigua], p. 3, Fitzroy to Stanley, February 10, 1843.

35 *Antigua Weekly Register*, February 9, 1843.

36 Parliamentary Papers (1843), House of Commons [441], p. 3, Fitzroy to Stanley, February 10, 1843.

37 Parliamentary Papers (1843), House of Commons [441], p. 3, Fitzroy to Stanley, February 10, 1843.

potential for material loss, but because its destruction could presage a challenge to their authority. White fears of rebellion remained acute because of the demographic trajectory their desire for a large enslaved work force had set the colonies on. On every island the African-Caribbean population outnumbered them; between the years 1830–32, there were 684,400 enslaved Africans across the Caribbean colonies in comparison to 32,500 slave-owning Whites (Higman 1995:74–100). These population imbalances explain why white elites were preoccupied with a desire to rapidly reassert their control in the aftermaths of disaster, but they do not explain why, in 1831 and 1834, their focus lay on using work to do that.

The preoccupation with work as a necessity for white control is reflective of the tradition of the punitive poor relief in Britain. Michael Barnett argues in his book *Empire of Humanity* that there was a direct linkage between the passage of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and the construction of relief in British colonies (Barnett 2011:63). Arguably, in the Caribbean, particularly in the example of the 1831 hurricane, this linkage was present prior to the passage of the 1834 Act. Work as the determiner for eligibility for state relief had a long history in Britain. The passage of the Workhouse Test Act in 1723 formally initiated schemes that mandated that the poor work for their relief. But it was not until 1834 that they were expanded wholesale and adopted as the central pillar of poor relief (Slack 1995:33). At the turn of the nineteenth century, informed by commentators such as Thomas Malthus, there was growing elite preoccupation with the idle poor to which the Amendment of 1834 emerged as a solution. In 1831 and to a degree 1834, work was similarly deployed as the solution to idleness, but there are important nuances to the use of such tactics in the Caribbean that mean they do not constitute a simple mirroring of approach.

In the Caribbean, idleness was part of a wider racialized discourse directed toward the African-Caribbean population. In contrast to the British poor who could work their way out of idleness, this trait was seen to be inherent in the imagined concept of the African race. Thus, through this important nuance, we can also understand that, as this article will go on to show, a preoccupation with idleness remained at the core of British responses to disaster across the long nineteenth century. Jonathan Dalby, in his article "Such a Mass of Disgusting and Revolting Cases," argues that in the postemancipation era, racial stereotyping of African-Caribbean peoples as inherently "lazy" remained ever present and if anything increased because of the loss of power plantation owners felt (Dalby 2015:144). The term *quashee* was a common descriptor for African-Caribbean peoples who were perceived as being "naturally" idle without white guidance. The term was used before the ending of slavery but gained wider use after Thomas Carlyle used it repeatedly in his infa-

mous essay “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question.”³⁸ Dalby suggests that even if they had differing levels of optimism for the Caribbean’s future planters, colonial officials and missionaries agreed that, because of the perceived accuracy of the *quashee* stereotype, British involvement was essential to guiding the development of the African-Caribbean peoples. Though not unique to the Caribbean, it is in this context that we can see the role race played in creating a point of divergence from domestic poor relief and thus understand why idleness remained a central preoccupation of British disaster response.

3 Relief in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Though a hurricane caused damage to Tobago in 1847, it paled in comparison to the damage experience by Barbados and Dominica in 1831 and 1834 respectively. In 1866 the Bahamas was hit by a destructive hurricane, but because plantations were not the islands’ main source of income and the African-Caribbean population was dispersed across the archipelago there was no major British response to the disaster. What is more, the islands recovered quickly; many people, white and black, directed themselves to the scavenging of shipwrecks caused by the hurricane, the profits from which returned the islands to prosperity (Neely 2011). It was not until 1898 that a British colony would again face disaster on such a scale that it necessitated a full-scale response from a colony’s governing class. The year 1898 in fact marked the beginning of a period in which the British-controlled Caribbean faced a spate of particularly destructive disasters. British responses to disaster in this period continued to exhibit a focus on African-Caribbean idleness, but they also drew more explicitly on the language and frameworks of domestic poor relief.

In 1898 the Windward Islands were hit by a hurricane, which wrought the most damage on St. Vincent and Barbados. On both these islands, following the near destruction of plantations, homes, and crops, the laboring population became quickly reliant on the colonial authorities for aid. Though forthcoming, from the outset those authorities explicitly sought to control who could draw on relief, preventing access to all except those who would labor for them. On St. Vincent, the island’s governor Alfred Moloney authorized indiscriminate relief for two days, after which those the authorities deemed fit to work were to

38 Thomas Carlyle, “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question,” *Fraser’s Magazine for Town and Country*, vol. 40, February 1849.

be denied access to further relief.³⁹ Barbadians were not even given two days of indiscriminate relief, Governor James Hay ordered that unless employment was impossible "no ... relief should be given."⁴⁰

A key concern underpinning the development of the 1834 Amendment had been to design relief in a manner that obviated dependence on state welfare. Unlike in 1831, 1834, and 1843, that concern surfaced in 1898 and took on elevated importance given recent poor assessments of the region's finances, thus marking a greater linkage between domestic and British Caribbean relief.⁴¹ Moloney, in private correspondence, wrote of his gratification in seeing the number of those able to claim relief being reduced and stressed his intent to investigate the "bona fides" of each case.⁴² After the two days of indiscriminate relief he drew up harsh guiding principles for those involved in the distribution of aid, which ordered officials to cease providing relief to any temporarily disabled person as soon as was possible. These guidelines also stated that the only circumstance in which distributors could make immediate remittances was when starvation was imminent.⁴³

Though it was a continuity by no means unique to the Caribbean, we can see that, despite the fact that white elites did not use violence as they had in 1831, little had changed in the principles they used to provide relief. If anything, drawing more explicitly on domestic policy as they were, they appear more committed to limiting African-Caribbean access. Despite the distance from slavery, the fear of disruption to labor precipitating a challenge to white authority remained their central preoccupation. Moloney, in correspondence with the Colonial Office, wrote that making the African-Caribbean population work for relief was necessary to avoid the "wholesale demoralization of the populous."⁴⁴

39 Parliamentary Papers (1898), House of Commons [C.9205], West Indies. Correspondence relating to the Hurricane on 10th–12th September 1898, and the Relief of the Distress Caused Thereby, p. 17, Moloney to Chamberlain, September 29, 1898.

40 Parliamentary Papers (1898), House of Commons [C.9205], West Indies. Correspondence relating to the Hurricane on 10th–12th September 1898, and the Relief of the Distress Caused Thereby, p. 74, Acting Governor Williams to Chamberlain, November 25, 1898.

41 West India Royal Commission, *Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew)*, 1897, pp. 131 and 343–44.

42 Parliamentary Papers (1899), House of Commons [C.9550], West Indies. Further Correspondence relating to the Hurricane on 10th–12th September 1898, and the Relief of the Distress Caused Thereby, p. 16, Moloney to Chamberlain, February 15, 1899.

43 Parliamentary Papers (1899), House of Commons [C.9550], West Indies. Further Correspondence relating to the Hurricane on 10th–12th September 1898, and the Relief of the Distress Caused Thereby, p. 16, Moloney to Chamberlain, February 15, 1899.

44 Parliamentary Papers (1898), House of Commons [C.9205], West Indies. Correspondence, p. 15, Moloney to Chamberlain, September 29, 1898.

In his words, work was the remedy to the “threat” posed by an able-bodied, African-Caribbean population “with nothing to do.”⁴⁵ African-Caribbeans were set to work repairing roads, clearing debris, and rebuilding the banks of low-lying agricultural works flooded with saltwater, and though they were paid for this work, their wages, because of wider geopolitical circumstances, were insufficient for the purchase of foodstuffs.⁴⁶

As has been the case on Barbados 1831, the hurricane of 1898 destroyed much of the edible crops on St. Vincent and Barbados. The typical posthurricane food shortages were further exacerbated by already depleted crops owing to a large drought that had afflicted the region in the months prior to the hurricane season. Consequently, on St. Vincent and Barbados both governors became quickly entirely reliant on imported foodstuffs to feed the population.⁴⁷ However, ongoing war between Spain and the United States had increased the price of imported food by around 20 percent.⁴⁸ As a result, three months after the hurricane, many cases of destitution still existed.⁴⁹ Yet, despite the observable failure of the work schemes to actually provide relief, the colonial desire to see the laboring population returned to employment reigned supreme. Moloney worked stringently to reduce the number of those still requiring relief, reallocating many sufferers a pauper dole normally set at four shillings per month.⁵⁰ He then reduced this dole to three shillings, an amount which he privately admitted was ‘barely sufficient to support existence’ but argued that it would have the beneficial effect of forcing dependents to seek work.⁵¹

Much as the white elite preoccupation with making African-Caribbean labor for relief persisted, so too did the stereotypes regarding their inherent idleness. Only a month after the hurricane, a visiting Naval Officer, J.L. Burr, referred

45 Parliamentary Papers (1898), House of Commons [C.9205], West Indies. Correspondence p. 79, Moloney to Chamberlain, December 7, 1898.

46 Parliamentary Papers (1898), House of Commons [C.9205], West Indies. Correspondence p. 35, Moloney to Chamberlain, October 17, 1898.

47 Parliamentary Papers (1898), House of Commons [C.9205], West Indies. Correspondence, p. 15, Moloney to Chamberlain, September 29, 1898.

48 CO 28/248 (Barbados) Colonial Office: Letters received from various government offices (departments), other organizations and individuals relating to Barbados, Williamson to Chamberlain, June 14, 1898.

49 Parliamentary Papers (1898), House of Commons [C.9205], West Indies. Correspondence, p. 81, Moloney to Chamberlain, December 7, 1898.

50 Parliamentary Papers (1898), House of Commons [C.9205], West Indies. Correspondence, p. 81, Moloney to Chamberlain, December 7, 1898.

51 Parliamentary Papers (1898), House of Commons [C.9205], West Indies. Correspondence, p. 81, Moloney to Chamberlain, December 7, 1898.

to those still immiserated by the hurricane as "negro-loafers."⁵² Loafers who "would not work even if they were offered employment" (a tacit acknowledgement that there was no work) and were quite prepared to incite others to acts of social unrest.⁵³ Similarly, two months on from the storm, Moloney, unhappy with the rate of their rebuilding, personally traveled around St. Vincent to deter the African-Caribbean population from becoming dependent on relief arguing that if they were to expect any relief, they must rebuild their own homes faster.⁵⁴ However, it was colonial priorities if anything that delayed the rebuilding of these houses. The island, as it had long been since the seventeenth century, was reliant on imported timber, imports that took time to reach the island and arrived in limited quantities. Consequently, in an attempt to prevent the rebuilding of the plantations falling behind, Moloney limited the amount of timber laboring households could draw on to eighty foot; an amount he privately acknowledged as "far from ideal."⁵⁵ Still suffering in the aftermath of the 1898 hurricane, on May 6, 1902 St. Vincent was hit by another setback when the island's volcano, La Soufrière, erupted for the first time since 1812. Even with a change of governor, the British relief effort in 1902 demonstrates that with the advent of the twentieth century, British Caribbean relief remained a space for punitive governance.

Following the eruption, the colonial authorities focused on pressing laborers into burying bodies to avert the spread of disease. Although this was an understandable precaution, focus on this work came at the expense of providing relief. Private correspondence shows that in the months that followed the eruption, Secretary of State for the Colonies Joseph Chamberlain and Llewelyn agreed that relief needed to be curtailed and that that should be done through a "labor test." Drawing directly on the language of domestic poor relief, they agreed that all those who were aged sixteen and above and who were "able-bodied" should be refused relief.⁵⁶

52 Parliamentary Papers (1898), House of Commons [C.9205], West Indies. Correspondence, p. 43, Admiralty to Colonial Office, October 20, 1898.

53 Parliamentary Papers (1898), House of Commons [C.9205], West Indies. Correspondence, p. 43, Admiralty to Colonial Office, October 20, 1898.

54 Parliamentary Papers (1898), House of Commons [C.9205], West Indies. Correspondence, p. 58, Moloney to Chamberlain, November 10, 1898.

55 Parliamentary Papers (1898), House of Commons [C.9205], West Indies. Correspondence, p. 62, Moloney to Chamberlain, November 25, 1898.

56 Parliamentary Papers (1904), House of Commons [Cd.1783], West Indies. Further correspondence relating to the volcanic eruptions in St Vincent and Martinique, in 1902 and 1903, p. 79, Llewelyn to Chamberlain, November 25, 1902.

With clear lineage from the conditions imposed on relief in 1898, “able-bodied persons” were only able to receive relief in return for bona fide labor.⁵⁷ What was considered bona fide were tasks that benefitted the colonial state: improving and repairing infrastructure or participation in agricultural tasks. When these works ended but suffering remained, private interests sought to take advantage of the distress. In a proposal to the Vincentian authorities, representatives of the Rowntree estate proposed taking those still in need of relief and setting them to work upgrading the roads of their Dominican estates.⁵⁸ Similarly, Mr. A. Porter, a Vincentian estate owner, argued that with the lack of labor posing a dangerous threat to the island, the authorities should give him a portion of the relief money so he could employ the “excitable” population in the restoration of his estate.⁵⁹

This brazen opportunism marks a development from earlier work-for-relief schemes where the colonial authorities set African-Caribbeans to work clearing and repairing damage done by disasters. However, it does not appear to have been a sustained development and it seems more reflective of the specific circumstances following the 1902 eruption. In contrast to the hurricane of 1898, which swept the whole island, in 1902 the eruption largely only affected the northern portion of the island, leaving the homes and places of employment for many untouched (Ober 1904:194). Because the destruction was not as total as it had been following disasters in 1831, 1834, and 1898 for example, food shortages were not widespread, and there was a smaller group of sufferers who could be exploited without provoking the mass unrest that Whites so feared. Indeed, the death toll reached approximately 1600 people many of whom were working on plantations at the base of the volcano and were killed outright. Half of those who were injured suffered such severe burns that they died within a week.⁶⁰

57 Parliamentary Papers (1904), House of Commons [Cd.1783], West Indies. Further correspondence relating to the volcanic eruptions in St Vincent and Martinique, in 1902 and 1903, p. 81, The Earl of Onslow to Llewelyn, November 26, 1902.

58 Parliamentary Papers (1904), House of Commons [Cd.1783], West Indies. Further correspondence relating to the volcanic eruptions in St Vincent and Martinique, in 1902 and 1903, p. 98, Messrs. Rowntree and Company Limited to Colonial Office, December 12, 1902.

59 Parliamentary Papers (1904), House of Commons [Cd.1783], West Indies. Further correspondence relating to the volcanic eruptions in St Vincent and Martinique, in 1902 and 1903, p. 38, Porter to Llewelyn, September 12, 1902.

60 Parliamentary Papers (1904), House of Commons [Cd.1768–8], St Vincent. Colonial Reports—annual, p. 25; Parliamentary Papers (1904), House of Commons [Cd.1783], p. 90, Llewelyn to Chamberlain, August 2, 1902.

In the areas affected by the volcano's lava and ash, the property damage was severe. Perversely, this situation appears to have encouraged Governor Llewelyn to create stricter stipulations for compensation claims. In the week that followed the eruption, he contacted the Colonial Office to assure that he was "weed[ing] out those undeserving of aid."⁶¹ He dictated there was to be no compensation for the loss of earning power through the destruction of crops.⁶² Furthermore, he ordered that, for a claim to be made, the claimant had to renounce his/her ownership of the land, so it could be vested in the Crown.⁶³ These rules mark an escalation in the strictness of British relief, and although not explicitly, they clearly reflect a desire to make claiming aid as undesirable as possible, not unlike the intent of British poor relief.⁶⁴

For the first time in the history of British responses to disaster, the strictness of these rules was subject to complaint from Whites. Two Wesleyan ministers James Darrell and Thomas Huckerby, who were deemed "mischievous" interferers by Llewelyn, took particular issue with the fact that the governor had restricted the distribution of provisions that had arrived from the United States.⁶⁵ Where, for lack of men to guard the provisions, in 1831 Drake had simply returned donations. Llewelyn was able to lock the U.S. donations in warehouses and pay, out of the relief fund, for police to guard them.⁶⁶ These actions which Darrell called a "violation of trust" are a clear manifestation of the recurrent British desire to limited access to relief in which providing genuinely needed assistance took a back seat. By retaining control over the U.S. aid, Llewelyn was able to incentivize the African-Caribbean population to work and, through the sale of the provisions, reinvigorate market forces in the colony.⁶⁷ Some provisions were later sold to the population at a profit to the colonial state, but, reflecting the low priority Llewelyn assigned to providing actual relief, most of the foodstuffs were left to rot.⁶⁸

61 Parliamentary Papers (1904), House of Commons [Cd.1783], p. 29, Enclosure no. 1 in Administrator Cameron to Colonial Office, telegram, May 23, 1902.

62 Parliamentary Papers (1904), House of Commons [Cd.1783], p. 19, Llewelyn to Chamberlain, August 2, 1902.

63 Parliamentary Papers (1904), House of Commons [Cd.1783], p. 19, Llewelyn to Chamberlain, August 2, 1902.

64 In Britain, the principle of "less eligibility" was used to ensure that conditions for claiming relief were always worse than those outside of the workhouse, thus deterring claimants.

65 TNA, CO 321/218 (St Vincent), Dispatches from Governor R.B. Llewelyn, St Vincent, Llewelyn to Chamberlain, January 26, 1903.

66 "Protest against Llewelyn," *Sentry*, October 17, 1902.

67 TNA, CO 321/218, "Protest by the unofficial members of the legislative council of St Vincent", January 29, 1903.

68 "Protest against Llewelyn," *Sentry*, October 17, 1902.

4 Relief in the Urban Environment

Even though the format of British responses to disaster in the Caribbean was never formally codified and was regularly overseen by different governors who were often dealing with different disasters, ensuring that African-Caribbean peoples were coerced into laboring for the colonial state remained the central guiding principle of relief. On January 14, 1907 Jamaica was hit by a powerful earthquake that affected points along its southeastern coast, but it caused most damage to the island's capital Kingston. Reflecting the characteristic belief of the white elites that disaster would precipitate a challenge to their authority, their first response was to deploy the West India Regiment and place the city "practically under martial law."⁶⁹

Quickly, however, the colonial preoccupation with getting the African-Caribbean population back to work surfaced. Where possible African-Caribbean peoples were put to work in the business of pulling down buildings and clearing rubble and were incentivized to do so by a temporary doubling of wages to allow them to purchase needed foodstuffs. However, as early as January 17, the island's governor Alexander Swettenham detailed his annoyance with the slow progress of these employment schemes and suggested that the "indisposition" of the laboring population was to blame.⁷⁰ The parallels between indisposition and idleness are clear; both functioned as a racial critique of African-Caribbeans' unwillingness to immediately engage in dangerous labor having suffered losses of life and property. Despite the dangers, some did participate, and a British observer noted that "where there was efficient direction the ordinary laborers worked with a will."⁷¹ However, an American account provides a different perspective which indicates that some degree of force was used; Admiral Charles Davis observed African-Caribbeans pressed into work gangs under armed guard.⁷² Gang labor was central to the function of plantations and that this form of labor was reasserted in central Kingston where individualized work was the norm is telling of the anxiety white elites

69 *The Tribune*, January 18, 1907; Jamaican Archives Records Department, E.A. Hodges, "The Secret History of the Earthquake."

70 Parliamentary Papers (1907), House of Commons [Cd.3560], Jamaica. Correspondence Relating to the Earthquake at Kingston, Jamaica, on 14th January 1907, p. 27, Swettenham to Grey, January 17, 1907.

71 C.L. Chenery, "The Jamaican Earthquake," reprinted from the *Barbados Advocate*, January 23, 24, and 25, 1907, p. 6.

72 TNA, CO 137/661 (Jamaica) Letters from the Foreign Office (March to December 1907) and "miscellaneous offices," Howard to Grey, February 4, 1907.

felt in regard to their control over the African-Caribbean population (Welch 2002:274). Perhaps further explaining their reticence to engage with this work is the fact that, whilst wages were technically doubled, laborers were actually paid with orders to be fulfilled at a later point. This not only required trusting that the colonial authorities would fulfil the orders, but also limited purchases to vendors who would accept the orders.

As has been shown to be the case in nearly all of the disasters considered in this article, the perceived insouciance of the African-Caribbean population in the aftermath of disaster was typically highlighted to justify the harsh treatment directed toward them. This was no different in 1907, but in the close, racially mixed environment of urban Kingston it became a tool used to separate the actions of usually "brave" Whites from their idle African-Caribbean counterparts. A white British eyewitness Major Chown related that directly after the earthquake "the black and colored population were stupefied with terror and amazement," but that at once they became "quite apathetic" and were to be found "lounging in the streets ... although labor [was] still in demand."⁷³

Characteristic of British Caribbean relief, work-for-relief schemes in 1907 eschewed the formal labor camps elsewhere in the Empire. However, they were still convened around the idea that they were to return Kingston's population to "sturdy independence," independence being the opposite of the dependence so abhorred in British domestic policy (Sharma 2001:141). Furthermore, like in 1902, only two weeks on from the disaster, the governor was privately writing of his intent to curtail the free distribution of food, and also to limit the cost of foodstuffs for those purchasing with the orders earned through colonial work schemes.⁷⁴ From February 8 onward, any claimants for food were subjected to characteristically "stringent" background checks that, in line with British trepidation over welfare dependency, were implemented with the sole purpose of disqualifying as many claimants as possible.⁷⁵ This arrangement clearly embodied many aspects of domestic welfare thinking and shows the centrality of work as an organizing principle for British Caribbean relief. Swettenham's relief program limited free handouts, incentivized work, and by exten-

73 Parliamentary Papers (1907), House of Commons [Cd.3560], p. 99, Admiralty to Colonial Office, February 26, 1907.

74 Parliamentary Papers (1907), House of Commons [Cd.3560], p. 35, Swettenham to Colonial Office, February 1, 1907.

75 Parliamentary Papers (1907), House of Commons [Cd.4586], Jamaica. Further Correspondence Relating to the Earthquake at Kingston, Jamaica, on 14th January 1907, pp. 57–58, Appendix v, General Relief Committee, p. 25.

sion resuscitated private enterprise. Tying relief to labor in this manner forced the laboring population to come under colonial control to ensure their survival.

Providing effective relief for Kingston's African-Caribbean population in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake assumed low priority for Swettenham because white attitudes to African-Caribbean life had changed little since the period of slavery. John Harrison has suggested that it was not until well into the twentieth century that white elites considered African-Caribbean peoples "of primary humanitarian concern" (Harrison 2011:57). During slavery, "welfare" so far as it existed was regarded as a private obligation of planters and merchants, nominally comprising subsistence and rudimentary health care to sustain the productivity of predominantly forced labor (Harrison 2011:55). An article published in a Barbadian newspaper in 1900 shows us how common these views remained; a planter wrote: "if a Negro's house is destroyed by fire or tempest, how long do you think it will take him to build another? Nature will give him food almost for the asking" (Richardson 1986:11). Implicit in this comment is the suggestion that because African-Caribbean living conditions were considered basic it lessened state responsibility toward them. Particularly in periods of crisis, this comment tacitly suggests that it was acceptable to leave the African-Caribbean population to fend for themselves.

Only in the weeks that followed the earthquake when white fears of civil disobedience had subsided did the relief effort take a less punitive turn. Food distribution centers were established throughout Kingston and they served approximately 3400 people a day; this food was initially provided indiscriminately without condition. However, it was lacking; *Leslies Weekly* regarded the rations being distributed as "meagre," consisting of only "two potatoes, a piece of bread and some brown sugar and molasses."⁷⁶ This was not for lack of supplies, as Admiral Davis reported that, despite the fact that many of Kingston's population were suffering from hunger, barrels of flour, rice, and maize lay strewn across the private Royal Mail Wharf. Davis offered to use these ingredients to bake bread for distribution to the hungry but was rebuffed.⁷⁷ Even with Davis's offer rejected, the colonial authorities could have fed the hungry; their private correspondence with the Colonial Office indicates there were large swathes of crops that remained unharmed across the island.⁷⁸ Yet, it appears that temporarily redirecting food for export to feed Kingston remained out

76 "After the fury of the earthquake in Kingston: a multitude of the homeless and destitute, without shelter and scantily supplied with food, and some peculiar effects of the shocks," *Leslies Weekly*, February 21, 1907, p. 173.

77 TNA, CO 137/661, Howard to Grey, February 4, 1907.

78 TNA, CO 137/662, McNeil to Grey, February 7, 1907.

of the question. Even when the colonial authorities attempted a less punitive relief effort, they were unable or unwilling to make full use of the supplies available to them.

5 Conclusion

Ultimately, this article has shown that above all British responses to disaster in the period 1831–1907 were guided by a desire to obviate the threat that they perceived disasters posed to their control. They saw their minority control as resting on their ability to control African-Caribbean labor. Therefore, they sought to coerce that population back into labor by making their access to relief conditional on their willingness to work. Even when, as was the case following the 1907 earthquake, the plantation economy was no longer so central to colonial profit, controlled access to relief by way of labor schemes and conditions was clearly the way the colonial authorities felt it was best to reinstate the social and racial hierarchy in a time of crisis. Wage labor reactivated the market forces of supply and demand, something which again aided efforts to re-assert colonial control. Similarly, throughout periodic famines in British-controlled India, Indians were forced into work schemes to prevent them becoming "indolent, vagabonds, or vagrants." As was common throughout Britain's empire, work was perceived as morally beneficial; it ameliorated perceived racial characteristics that were seen to clash with colonial goals.

Across the long nineteenth century, the British approach to relief did develop a greater linkage with domestic poor relief policy. From 1898 to 1907 much of the language used by white elites directly mirrored that used to categorize paupers in Britain and whilst military force was used less frequently when compared with 1831, relief became more explicitly punitive. That said, because white elites always viewed their control as contingent on having African-Caribbean peoples labor for them and/or the colonial state, there is still a strong continuity in the British approach to disaster relief through the periods of slavery, apprenticeship, and freedom. Though relief practices were never governed by a formally codified set of rules, British relief remained organized around a desire to obviate idleness in the African-Caribbean population and by extension restore the plantations and profit-making industries that remained the central British priorities in the region.

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