

CHRISTOPHER CODRINGTON

and the welfare of the enslaved

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WAS CHRISTOPHER CODRINGTON CONCERNED ABOUT THE WELFARE OF THE ENSLAVED?

This display addresses the questions:

- Did the wellbeing of the enslaved weigh on Codrington's conscience?
- Was he an abolitionist or in any way opposed to enslavement?
- Did he *act* to improve the material well-being of the enslaved on his plantations?
- Did he *act* to improve their spiritual well-being (as he saw it) through converting them to Christianity?
- What became of any such efforts when his plantations were inherited by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG)?

CODRINGTON'S CONSCIENCE: THE CASE FOR THE DEFENCE I

The main evidence is a letter from Codrington to William Popple, secretary of the Board of Trade, 1699:

"I have always thought it very barbarous that **so little care should be taken of the bodies and so much [less] of the souls of our poor slaves**. Their condition has cost me many a **mortifying reflection**, and yet I know not how I shall be able to mend it in any one respect but **feeding my own slaves well**…"*

The only way to improve the lot of the enslaved that Codrington envisaged was feeding them well: no mention of reduced working hours or lighter punishments for misdemeanours.

*'America and West Indies: May 1699, 26-31', Document no. 458, *British History Online*

CODRINGTON'S CONSCIENCE: THE CASE FOR THE DEFENCE II

Codrington went on to say that he would entrust the preparation of the enslaved for Christian baptism to monk-like clerics. The plan for these may have reflected his reading of the monastic Church Fathers and the example of Jesuit and other Catholic missionaries.



Portrait of Christopher Codrington (1668–1710) by James Thornhill, held at All Souls College

CODRINGTON'S CONSCIENCE: THE CASE FOR THE DEFENCE III

In December 1701, in Antigua, the so-called 'Corromantee' slaves (mainly from the Gold Coast) revolted and decapitated their master. Codrington defended them:

"I'm afraid he [the master] was guilty of some unusual act of severity, or rather some indignity towards the Corromantes, for they are not only the best and most faithful of our slaves, but are really all born heroes… intrepid to the last degree… and obedient to a kind master, but implacably revengeful when ill-treated."*

Slaves should thus not be treated with 'unusual severity', but regular severity was by implication acceptable.

*'America and West Indies: December 1701, 27-31', Document no. 1132, *British History Online*

CODRINGTON'S CONSCIENCE: THE CASE FOR THE PROSECUTION

In spite of these two examples of Codrington demonstrating some consideration for the welfare of enslaved people, the case against him is compelling.

Codrington took a dim view of runaways and of the laxness of Catholics, as he saw it, in allowing the enslaved too many holidays.

In June 1699, Codrington wrote twice to the Council of Trade and Plantations about runaway slaves. In his first letter, he clearly expresses his displeasure that the French were not returning runaway slaves to him:

CODRINGTON'S CONSCIENCE: THE CASE FOR THE PROSECUTION



"I have been pressed… to put you in mind of the **negroes who have escaped to the French and not [been] handed over notwithstanding frequent demands**. This is an affair of the last [i.e. greatest] importance… for a great number of negroes will certainly get off in sloops and boats, both from a natural **desire of changing their masters upon the least severe usage** [i.e. for better conditions], and upon the encouragement of **these many [Catholic religious] holidays the French allow their slaves**…"*

*'America and West Indies: June 1699, 21-30', Document no. 576, *British History Online*

CONVERSION AS A STEP TOWARDS ABOLITION?

In his second letter, Codrington demonstrated that converting the enslaved to Christianity was no step towards emancipation as far as he was concerned:

"We are at peace with the French and the negroes are as much our property as our cattle, etc… Christianity does not alter the condition of men nor destroy the right of tenure by which slaves are held."*

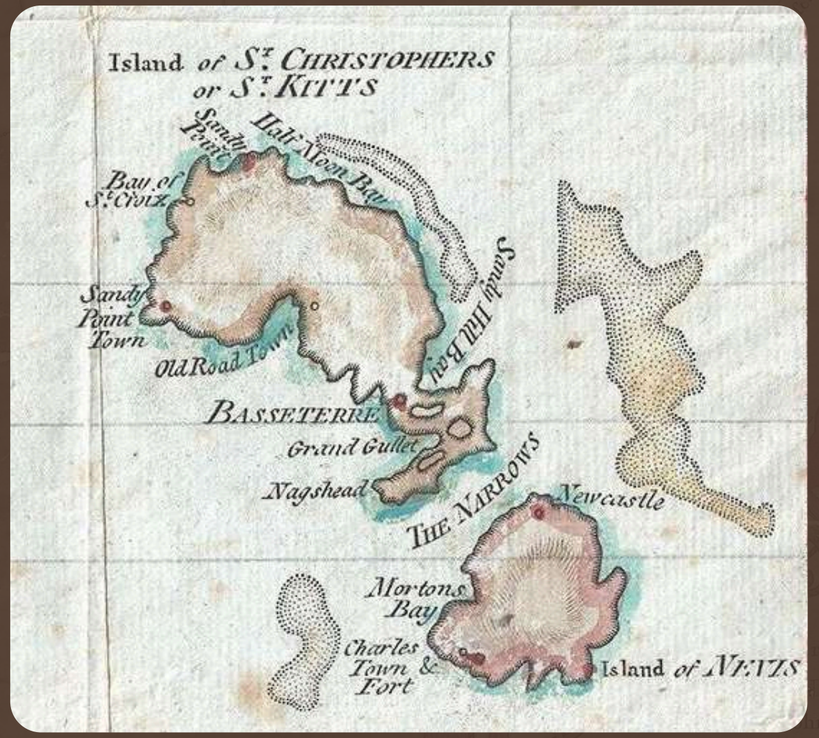
On the contrary, he looked to the future. He or his manager were purchasing enslaved children from 1701 if not earlier. Shortly before his death in 1710, he also purchased around 100 'new negroes' from Africa. Codrington was clearly not withdrawing from the trade.**

*'America and West Indies: July 1699, 6-10', Document no. 628, *British History Online*

**The National Archives, Royal African Company, T70/950/18; 951/20; 952/21 etc. For 1710 see J. Harry Bennett, Jr., 'The Problem of Slave Labor Supply at the Codrington Plantations', *The Journal of Negro History*, 36.4 (October 1951), p. 412

PROTECTING THE SPIRITUAL WELFARE OF THE ENSLAVED?

When Codrington was appointed Governor of the Leeward Islands in 1698, encouraging '**the conversion of negroes** [= enslaved]' was among his routine official instructions from the government in London. He was also '**to endeavour to get a law restraining inhuman severities and punishing the wilful killing of Indians and negroes with death.**'



Map of some of the British Leeward Islands (Wikimedia Commons)

PROTECTING THE SPIRITUAL WELFARE OF THE ENSLAVED?

The degree of concern for the spiritual and bodily welfare of the enslaved demonstrated in these official instructions was becoming more usual in Britain.

However, Codrington knew that his chances of success with conversion were slim. Other planters were opposed to any education of the enslaved as part of their Christianisation. It would reduce labour time, and lead to demands for freedom, or, worse, rebellion.

PROVIDING CHRISTIAN INSTRUCTION FOR THE ENSLAVED?

There is no clear evidence that Codrington actively sponsored any Christian instruction of the enslaved, and some evidence that he did not.

In 1723 the Bishop of London sent a questionnaire to all colonial clergy. The return from one Antigua parish was made by Simon Smith, who had served in the plantations for thirty years. He had been presented to Falmouth Parish in 1701. While serving there, he 'resided with Governor Codrington'.

In answer to the question 'are there any infidels, bond or free, within your parish; and what means are used for their conversion?' he responded: '**nothing done for negroes**'.*

*Lambeth Palace Library, Fulham papers, vol. 19, folios 119-20

CODRINGTON'S WILL, FEBRUARY 1703

Codrington made no mention of eventually releasing his enslaved people in his will:

"I give and bequeath my two plantations in the Island of Barbados to the Society for Propagation of the Christian Religion in Foreign Parts … and my desire is to have the plantations continued entire, and **three hundred negros at least kept always thereon**, and a convenient number of professors and scholars maintained there, *all of them to be under the vows of poverty chastity and obedience*, who shall be obliged to study and practice physic [medicine] and surgery as well as divinity, that by the apparent usefulness of the former to all mankind, they may both endear themselves to the people and have the better opportunity of doing good to men's souls whilst they are taking care of their bodies."*

[spelling modernized]

*Copy of the Will of Christopher Codrington, Bodleian MS. Rawl. C. 983, fol. 157. See also TNA, PROB 11/519/220

CODRINGTON AND THE SPG



Seal of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts

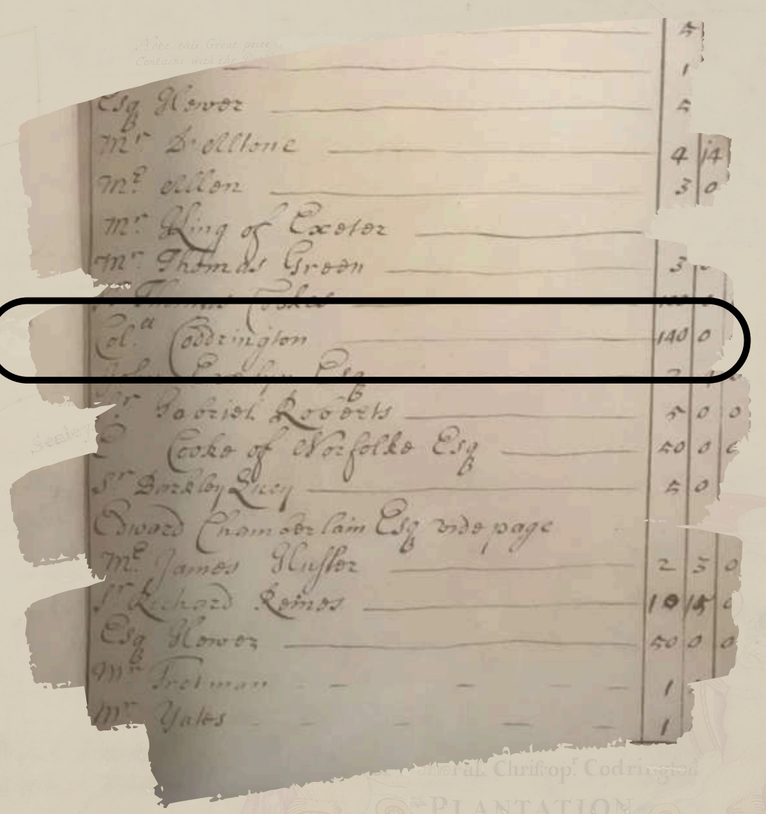
The bequest to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) is striking. The SPG was a very new organisation in 1703 when the will was made.

A link with it was Thomas Bray, one of its founders. Bray had matriculated as an undergraduate from All Souls in 1675. He had left the College before Codrington's arrival. But the two could have met in the 1690s after Bray moved to London and Codrington visited the capital.

CODRINGTON AND THE SPG

Bray's account book for the years 1695-1699 shows Codrington subscribing £140, by far the largest sum of all those listed, towards plantation libraries.*

Yet there were other connections than that with Bray, of perhaps equal influence. Codrington's tutor when he was an undergraduate at Christ Church, Oxford, would also become involved with the SPG. Codrington's great friend Francis le Jau became an SPG missionary. Catholic missionaries also influenced him.



SPG Archives, Bray Associates fol. 11a, reproduced by kind permission of the Archivist

* H. Thompson, *Thomas Bray* (London, 1954), pp. 72–81

THE SPG AND THE CODRINGTON PLANTATIONS

Missionary work on the SPG's plantations was limited, intermittent, and unsuccessful: relatively few converts are recorded:

- By 1730 only 37 individuals had been baptized, 15 of them children.
- By 1745 missionary Joseph Bewsher found fewer than 20 on the SPG Codrington plantation 'who could repeat their catechism', and these were no older than 12 or 13.

THE SPG AND THE CODRINGTON PLANTATIONS

Many enslaved people who had been transported from Africa had not learned enough English to understand those preaching to them.

Joseph Holt was minister of St Joseph's Church, Barbados, and he replied bitterly to the Bishop of London's questionnaire of 1723 concerning the conversion of 'infidels and atheists' in his parish:

> "Transported slaves are stupidly ignorant, and it's a long time before they understand anything of our speech."*

Of course, he did not allow the possibility that some at least were feigning ignorance as a form of protest.

*Lambeth Palace Library, Fulham papers, vol. 15, folio 207

THE SPG AND THE CODRINGTON PLANTATIONS

Enslaved people who did know English may have had no wish to follow the religion of their masters. They would have been expected to spend Sundays engaged in Christian education, and not in looking after their own crops and affairs.

The SPG protested at cruelty to the enslaved in general. Yet its first concern was the efficiency and profitability of its plantations. Disorderly slaves were sold on. Those who refused to attend religious instruction might be whipped or beaten. SPG officials had no compunction about using violence. From 1724 to 1732, at a time when the number of enslaved who ran away was at its highest, newly purchased enslaved on the SPG's Barbados plantations were branded 'SOCIETY' on their chests.