

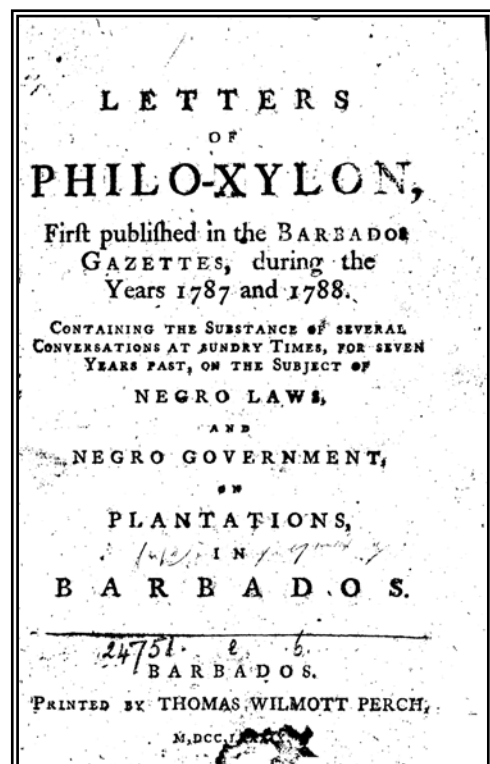
PHILO-XYLON AND THE RACE OF ‘INDOLENT BEGGARS’

JO ANNE HARRIS

GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, ATLANTA, GEORGIA

1 Introduction

In letters written from Barbados to the Royal Society of Arts in London during the 1780's, Sir Joshua Steele describes white poverty and planter corruption in Barbados from his very particular and unique perspective as a member of the plantocracy. Yet, in contrast to most planters, Steele advocated radical social reforms that included ameliorating work conditions for the enslaved blacks and implementing work projects for the poor whites who defied all attempts to make them productive members of Barbados society. By 1788, opposition to Steele and his projects had become so intense that he adopted a pseudonym, 'Philo-Xylon,' for the many letters he wrote to the *Barbados Gazette* about plantation reform. In 1789 T.W. Perch compiled and printed many of Philo-Xylon's letters as *Letters of Philo-Xylon first published in the Barbados gazettes, during the years 1787 and 1788; Containing the substance of several conversations at sundry times, for seven years past, on the subject of negro laws, and negro government, on plantations, in Barbados*. This second anthology of works from *The Barbados Gazette* has remained relatively obscure in spite of the fact that many of Philo-Xylon's writings, along with Steele's signed letters, form part of William Dickson's *Mitigation of Slavery, in Two Parts* published in 1814. Access to selections of Steele's work is available online through the website of *The Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition* at Yale University, however the bulk of his letters are in archives in London with only limited access. This paper focuses on those forgotten letters as a precursor to emancipation and as a model for the Barbados Freedmen's letters and petitions for equal civil rights.



2 Sir Joshua Steele and the Poor Whites

In contrast to the pastoral poetry of Nathaniel Weekes and John Singleton's racist poetical reinforcement of the planter *status quo* as argument for maintaining a white supremacist ideology, Joshua Steele's letters address the problematic of a plantation society plagued by poor whites whose color nonetheless failed to elevate them economically and socially above the status of blacks. In 1751, George Washington had written about this phenomenon in his diary during a nine-month stay in Barbados when he observed, "there are few who may be called middling [sic] people, they are either very rich or very poor" (qtd. in Goddard 17). In part, this may be explained by the fact that the Barbadian economy was booming. However, by the time Joshua Steele arrived in 1782, sugar production was down due to a series of natural disasters and wars combined with a decline in sugar profits that had destabilized the plantation system and jeopardized white domination. In particular, the inability of the island to feed itself was a devastating effect of the collapse of North American trade with the West Indian colonies as a result of the American Revolution and wars with France and Holland. Then, when Barbados experienced one of its most destructive hurricanes in 1780, the decimation of the island's sugar crop left the economy struggling to recoup its hold on the sugar market, while many of the island's residents were on the verge of starvation. In order to mitigate the effects of this economic decline, planters experimented with other crops such as cotton, silk, and mangoes and attempted to implement the English apprentice system in order to improve the economic status of poor whites.

We know little about Steele's early life or origins, but his letters describing the problem of white poverty and planter corruption in Barbados provide a very particular and unique perspective on plantocracy and its relationship with imperial business interests in London. Steele wrote most of his letters as reports to the London Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, created in 1754 through a proposal by William Shipley to be "a beacon for Enlightenment values and to remove social barriers to progress" (RSA). In 1758, it initiated awards in six categories: Agriculture, Chemistry, Colonies & Trade, Manufactures, Mechanics and Polite Arts (painting and the plastic arts). Steele, a member who had inherited numerous plantations in Barbados from his wife, was already well known and respected for his views on musical artifacts and his collaboration on *Philosophical Transactions*, a book published by the Society. He had written about his theories of phonetics and in 1774 published *An Essay towards establishing the melody and measure of speech to be expressed and perpetuated by certain symbols*. In 1778, he became active in the Society of West India merchants and Planters, a group formed to protect the interests of absentee owners of plantations. In *White Creole Culture and Politics*, David Lambert writes that although Steele's motivation for moving to

Barbados in 1780 is not clear, he remained there until his death in 1796 (46-50). When Steele arrived in Barbados, he found both his plantations and the local economy in deplorable condition and calculated that his overseer had been stealing at least £2000 annually. In a letter to the London Society dated July 14, 1781, he writes of the rampant theft among plantation managers and the need to solve the problem of poor whites who refused to work. In this letter he writes, “yet the great Bulk of Them are poor, ignorant & slothfull, and a very great Burden, for their maintenance in idleness, on the Incomes of the landed and Trading Interest and pass their time drinking and wandering the streets of Bridgetown” (2). This contrasts sharply with his comments in the same letter about the “black or Mulatto Labourers, whose industry is upon the whole diligently exerted” (2). In an attempt to explain the decidedly un-English behavior of the poor whites, he uses the tropical climate as a justification for their sloth.

The Climate, notwithstanding the casual Interference of a Hurricane once or twice in a Century, is so delightfull & temperate, that when our white people are once accustomed to the sweets of Indolence and Beggary, it requires more art, than ever has been yet attempted here, to persuade them that shoes, stockings, or any more cloathing, than a ragged shirt or shift; with an osnabrig Breeches or petticoat, are worth the Labour of working for; Victuals, they beg from house to house, & they easily find some hovel to lie under at night. It certainly requires some art, in a climate that prones man to Indolence, to excite these poor people to do something more for themselves, & something for the community. Otherways, to multiply a Race of idle Beggars, adds neither strength nor wealth to any Country: To exercise this art - is to be the great business of our young Society –

I am My Lords & Gentlemen,
with treat Respect,
Your most obedient and
most humble Servant
Joshua Steele (RSA).

These observations contrast Singleton’s negative depiction of blacks as indolent ‘savages,’ and challenge the poetic illusion of a superior, hardworking white society responsible for agricultural abundance. This reality of a white laboring class that refused to work formed the basis for Steele’s proposal to establish a Barbados Society for Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce and in 1781, Steele sent the first charter to the London Society for approval. Steele intended for his project to foster an ‘enlightened’ vision and part of that vision included changing many of the

'iniquitous' laws in Barbados that prevented blacks from testifying against any white person. In later years he often expressed his opinion that it was that lack of a fundamental civil right that perpetuated the problem of theft among the poor whites.

Steele's other correspondence in these early years indicates that his projects, while not controversial, were perhaps meeting resistance in London. A June 13, 1783 letter to the London Society discusses a salt works project that was being planned for the Ford Plantation. He writes, "I hope no illiberal ideas will be excited in England, by seeing that we are endeavouring to reclaim 2 or 20 thousand indolent beggars from rags & wretchedness to be fed & cloathed by their own Industry" (RSA).

On May 24, 1785, in response to a May 3rd, 1784 letter from London, he discusses the failure of his project to produce vegetable silk, stating:

I have told you in a former letter how low the genius of Enterprise is in this Island. Indeed there is too much Reason to think that the Faculties of the British Race in this fine Climate, debased by the iniquitous laws & consequent Morals of the Colony, are sunk something below the level of Negro genius. It is with great difficulty, & the allurements extraordinary [unclear] that we can prevail on the thoroughbred beggars of the 4th and 5th generation, to earn a quarter of their living by spinning; but they propogate [sic] their lazy species to infinity, where Rabbits dwindle. And particularly that called Kendals, was the Estate where Ligon - the Hibernian resided, & which has furnished the story of Yarico & Inkle - a pond closets the south side of Kendal's and is still called Yarico's pond . . . [Steel continues with some descriptions and once again refers to 'iniquitous laws' that perpetuate plantation corruption and decrease the profitability of the island] (RSA).

Steele continues with a discussion focusing on "the thorough corruption of the morals of owners & other white servants" that had cheated him out of at least 2000 pounds per year:

but where Negroes tho' civilised & discreet in their business, are no evidence against white men, (who may kill them with impunity if no white evidence is in sight) they have, in effect, the full benefit of Gyger's Ring and their morals are thereby encouraged to admit of cheating without control, for they make out accounts & can swear to them without possibility of legal contradiction (RSA).

Although Steele would eventually become Chief Justice and Attorney General of Barbados in 1790, his efforts to ameliorate the slave conditions and implement a

copyhold system of labor to pay slaves for their work, met with vigorous resistance from most local planters. This placed Steele in a marginal position within the planter's social group and David Lambert argues that Steele's reports "manifest a gaze of surveillance, which Steele's position as an outsider allowed him to bring to bear" (52). The most radical of Steele's reforms included the banning of the whip on Kendal's plantation and the implementation of the copyhold system. Although Steele was successful on his own plantations, no other planters were persuaded to follow his lead and on March 13, 1786 Steele wrote a report to the London Society that he had brought up the resolution in Council for two years with the result that,

considering the general decrease of Negro Slaves in this Island, it appeared to them, that there must be something radically wrong either in the public laws relating to their slaves, in this colony, or in the private government of their plantations. And that the public laws, making no distinction between Negroes in the Hands of Slave Merchants, & Negroes settled on plantations, or cultivated grounds; the labouring slaves were thereby liable to be used as chattel, or sold for payment of debts, whereby being torn from their families & local connections, was one leading cause of their decrease; as it is notorious, that Negroes, thus removed, generally languish and die in a short time; Therefore, it was the opinion of the Committee, that all plantation slaves should be inseparably attached by law, to the Land, as real Estate, in all areas whatsoever (RSA).

The problem with the preceding recommendation is that the committee could not agree on how to implement this and Steele continues in the same report:

in proceeding to point out how the Slaves might be made more comfortable, by being put under some legal protection, like that of the Saxon and Norman Bond Slaves; The Idiosyncracies, that is, the prejudices of birth & education in some very worthy Members, revolted against their cool reason: wherefore, the warm Promotors of the Reformation, thought it prudent to defer attempting to draw up a Report on the 2nd clause, which with further Reflection might have time to reconcile the public feelings to Regulations, which their Reason admits as necessary to be brought about in Future. . . tho they start at laying the Foundation of what, humanity, as well as the common Interest of the Colony, inseparately requires. In the meanwhile we are proceeding on the 3rd clause (RSA).

Steele's reports indicate that at this time the debates had been going on for four or five years with no consensus on the reforms and his tone reflects both anger and frustration with the planters:

I can not prudently turn my Back upon such a Property as I have here, to expose it to be plundered, as it was before my arrival. Tho I have had property here for above 30 years before I ever saw the island, I never comprehended to what barefaced plundering the Estates of Absentees were exposed, till I saw the Profligacy or Immorality of the manner, which fostered by the Iniquitous Laws, seem as if the whole Frame had been contrived by a Combination of Fools or Knaves, for the purpose of covering the Frauds of Stewards of Governors. The old Laws of St. Kitts, Antigua etc. were copied originally from those of this Island, but they have been since amended & much improved, while the proud Ignorance of this Mother Colony, adheres to its original Barbarity. The Negroes, in most of those Islands, I understand, are now attached to the soil, & under a certain modification, the English Stature of Legit is in force there, whereby the Estates are not destroyed, or mismanaged, but the Debts are paid out of the Income. In this Island, the legal proceedings for payment of debts, is to take off the Negroes in the first plan; by which means, the land deprived of its Labourers is reduced to a waste - and since my arrival I have seen several thousand acres reduced, & now lying uncultivated ... The most sensible planters of this island think as I do, of the impolicy & iniquity of these Laws; But from, I know not what reasoning, they think it prudent to conceal this iniquity from Strangers. I, on the Contrary, wish to cry it aloud, & to expose the Folly to all the world, as the most probable way to have the Errors amended (RSA).

Lambert addresses this issue from the perspective of the planter ideal and the notion that “the reform of slavery was a ‘natural’ consequence of self-interested benevolence, but only if metropolitan abolitionists did not interfere in West Indian affairs” (65). This tension with the metropolitan interests created a type of creole “embryonic nationalism” that engaged the abolition discourse when John Poyer later attempted to reinscribe poor whites into society by re-writing the history of Barbados.

After his death in 1792, Steele remained a peculiar anomaly in Barbadian society. Lambert writes that Steele had an enslaved colored mistress, Anna Slatia, who was part of an estate that Steele had leased from a local planter. They lived together until she died and on his death Steele willed the bulk of his property to their two children, Catherine Anne and Edward. However, since Steele never manumitted Anna or his

children, the legal conundrum surrounding the threat of enslaved children inheriting property challenged both cultural and legal precedents in Barbados. White supremacy was so ingrained in Barbados that ultimately the executor of the will sent the Steele children to Britain where he had them manumitted. Unfortunately, in Barbados the question of Steele's will and inheritance remained unchallenged resulting in the children's *de facto* disinheritance (64).¹ As unfair as it may appear today, this was a common situation, that only serves to highlight the problems encountered when basing freedom and legal enfranchisement on skin color. Steele's correspondence reflects his own ambivalence over slavery and suggests that at least some planters rejected the notion of profiting through the unpaid labor of the enslaved. While he neglected to manumit either his mistress or his children, Steele seemed tacitly to recognize their legal rights as his children by including them in his will. Thus, in a sense Steele's public recognition of his enslaved children, combined with his efforts to improve conditions for the enslaved and his project to employ the poor whites and raise them out of poverty, provided a model for social reform that paved the way for the Barbados Freedmen's many petitions for civil rights. These largely unpublished manuscripts form part of the earliest Afro-Caribbean written record and may arguably be the genesis for an Afro-Caribbean identity.

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¹ Even after diligent research, I was unable to find any record about the children in either Steele's letters or in the archives in Barbados or London. In a conversation with David Lambert, he could offer no further information about the children or their mother.

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