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# The Nineteenth-century historians of Trinidad

by

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Three significant histories of Trinidad were published in the nineteenth century, by E.L. Joseph, P.G.L. Borde and L.M. Fraser.

Borde was a white Creole, from the island's influential French Creole community ; Joseph and Fraser were Englishmen who had settled in the island. These men were part of the small circle of educated whites with literary, scientific and historical interests which Port of Spain (like all the larger colonial Caribbean capitals) possessed at this period. Such men established the Port of Spain Library in 1841 and the nucleus of a museum in 1893. Their work undoubtedly reflected a real pride in the island and a genuine (if inevitably limited) enthusiasm for historical and scientific research. Moreover, the "Creole" orientation of these three early histories – as opposed to the "Imperial" trend so influential in the historiography of the British Caribbean in this period – was certainly encouraged by the prominent French Creole community, whose members were far from being uncritical admirers of British imperialism. It is significant that the most important writer of the three, Borde, chose to write in French and to publish in Paris ; Fraser, though English by birth, was allied by marriage and interest to the French Creoles and wrote as an "adopted" Creole.

The first history of Trinidad appeared in 1838, the year marked by the final end of slavery in the British Caribbean. Its author, E.L. Joseph, was apparently Anglo-Jewish ; he settled in Trinidad around 1818, working as a journalist and newspaper editor until his death in the island in 1838<sup>1</sup>. In 1876 and 1883, P.L.G. Borde published an ambitious two-volume work,

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1. E.L. Joseph, *History of Trinidad* (Port of Spain, London, Glasgow, 1838 ; reprinted London, 1971). The re-issue is a facsimile reprint. He also published a novel, *Warner Arundell The Adventures of a Creole* (London 1838), which is set in Trinidad, Venezuela and the Eastern Caribbean and is of a considerable historical interest. His Jewish ethnicity is attested to in the diary of a contemporary, Friedrich Ulrich, who describes him as "*the Jew*" : A. de Verteuil, ed., *The Ulrich Diary Trinidad 1830-1832*, trans. M. de Verteuil (Port of Spain, 1995), pp. 114-115, entry for 11 March 1832.

in French, on the history of Trinidad under Spanish rule (1498-1797). Borde, born in 1820 into a prominent French Creole family, seems to have had interests in cocoa properties ; but he accepted the fairly humble position of Keeper of the main Port of Spain cemetery and died apparently in genteel poverty in 1891<sup>2</sup>. Our third historian, L.M. Fraser, was born in England around 1830 ; after serving as a military officer, he settled in Trinidad in 1857, married into a prominent French Creole family, and joined the civil service. He served at various times as Commandant of Police, Inspector of Prisons, Registrar of the Supreme Court and Stipendiary Magistrate for St. Joseph. On retirement he wrote leading articles for the colony's main newspaper ; he died in 1901. His two-volume History of Trinidad was published (with a subsidy from the local government) in 1891 and 1896<sup>3</sup>.

Joseph purported to write a history of Trinidad from the " discovery " (1498) to 1837 ; but almost half of his book is devoted to natural history and geography, and his treatment of strictly historical matters is generally sketchy. As Borde scathingly remarks, Joseph covered 300 years (1498 to 1797) in exactly 88 pages, and most of those 88 pages dealt with the last decade of Spanish rule (1783-97). (Borde, 1, XXXIII). His attempt to narrate events between 1498 and 1733 is desultory at best, but he has more to offer for the period 1783 to 1837. Though he brings his coverage right up to 1837, ending with a detailed account of the mutiny by African soldiers at St. Joseph in that year, he generally gives only a brief outline of events after 1803, explaining that a detailed narrative would be " not to treat of history, but to discant on that ungrateful subject, the politics of a small community " (Joseph, 226). Although, as we will see, Joseph used some important archival sources which had disappeared by the time Borde and Fraser wrote their books, his work is neither scholarly nor comprehensive. Its significance is purely " adventitious ", as Elsa Goveia notes, rather than being due to its merit as a piece of historical writing<sup>4</sup>.

Borde's work deals in considerable detail with the period 1498 to 1797. He provides a connected narrative of events, with a few analytical chapters in which he considers the state of the society and institutions of Trinidad at particular moments, especially in 1622 and again in 1797. Though one of his main concerns is to celebrate the achievements of the French settlers who emigrated after 1776, about three-quarters of the total work is devoted to the period before their arrival. Since Borde's contemporary, Fraser, begins his narrative in 1781, there is some overlap between Borde's last chapters and Fraser's first : but most of Fraser's work concerns the period after the British capture in 1797. Fraser's second volume ends in 1839. He intended to write a third volume, starting

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2. P.G.L. Borde, *Histoire de la Trinidad sous le gouvernement espagnol* (2 vols. Paris, Vol. 1, 1876, Vol. 2, 1883). An English translation under the title *The History of Trinidad under the Spanish Government* has been published in two volumes (Port of Spain, 1982). All subsequent quotations in this essay are from the 1982 English translation. For Borde's life, see *Introduction* to Vol. 1 (1982), pp. IX-XII.

3. L.M. Fraser, *History of Trinidad* (Port of Spain, vol. 1, 1891, vol. 2, 1896 ; reprinted London 1971). The re-issue is a facsimile reprint in two volumes. For Fraser's life see Percy L. Fraser, " 47 Years a Public Servant, 1885-1932 ", unpublished ms., pp. 2-3.

4. E.V. Goveia, *A Study on the Historiography of the British West Indies to the end of the Nineteenth Century* (Mexico City, 1956), 108.

in 1840, and going up to 1865 or perhaps 1870, but apparently died before he could complete it<sup>5</sup>.

Of the three authors, it is Borde who wrote with the clearest sense of mission or purpose. He stated that he determined to devote many years of his life to researching and writing the history of his native land for five reasons : to gather the surviving archival sources for the Spanish period before they all disappeared ; to rectify generally accepted geographical and historical errors about Trinidad ; to bring to light the colonisation of a Spanish island with a French population ( " unique in history " ) and thus to " revive the honour of our ancestors " ; to make Trinidad's history known to the European officials and clergy who would serve there ; and to instruct the island's youth in their history, the only foundation for true patriotism (Borde, 1, XXIV-XXVII). In a sense, then, Borde saw history as an essential tool for " nation-bulding ", even though his nationalist sentiments were tacitly confined to white Trinidadians of different European origins. Borde's was an embryonic nationalism with the potential for far wider application than he gave it : " Let us then know who we are, for it is only by knowing one another that we shall succeed in understanding. Unity does not result from placing side by side perfectly identical bodies, but more from the fusion of diverse matters ". (Borde, 1, XXVII).

The two English-born historians, Joseph and Fraser, did not profess any such nationalistic purposes. Joseph seems to have written his book because no narrative of the island's history existed in 1838 and he thought one was needed. Fraser wrote that people in Britain had known little of Trinidad, despite its associations with the old English " sea dogs " and more recent heroes like Nelson, until the novelist Charles Kingsley published his famous *At Last*, his account of his sojourn in the island. This book put Trinidad on the " tourist circuit " ; but the more recent work by J.A. Froude had spread libels and malicious exaggerations about the Caribbean colonies among British readers. But neither Kingsley nor Froude, Fraser noted, had written histories ; Joseph's book was (in 1891) out of print ; and Borde's stopped at 1797. Fraser's aim, therefore, was to provide a " connected narrative " of Trinidad's history as a British colony, implicitly for a mainly British readership (Fraser, 1, XI-XII)<sup>6</sup>.

All three historians can fairly be described as " amateurs " : none had academic training or was based at a university. Of the three, Borde is clearly the most scholarly, and Goveia is correct to note that he " deserves a very high place among the local historians of the West Indies " <sup>7</sup>. But Joseph and Fraser, as well as Borde, used such archival sources as were available to them, as well as oral history informants and " traditions " .

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5. Fraser makes it clear that he intended to write a third volume : 11, 379-80, and note, 119. According to his son, Percy Fraser, he was writing the third volume when he died (1901). Antony Maingot, however, says the manuscript of the third volume was destroyed in the 1903 Red House fire : Maingot, " From ethnocentric to national history writing in the plural society ", *Caribbean Studies* 9 (3), October 1969, n. 28, 76.

6. Fraser does not say explicitly that he wrote his book to refute the " libels " in J.A. Froude, *The English in the West Indies* (New-York, 1888), but this may have been a motive. His contemporary, the African-Trinidadian scholar J.J. Thomas, wrote a famous rebuttal to Froude, *Froudacity* (London, 1889, reprinted London, 1969).

7. Goveia, p. 127.

Joseph explains that his narrative of events before 1733 is very sketchy because of the lack of "authentic documents" available to him; most of the old Spanish records had been destroyed, or taken to Caracas, just after the British capture. There were some records at St. Joseph, the former Spanish capital, including some Cabildo papers dating from before 1733, but these were "so decayed by time, and eaten by insects, as to be of no avail". Hence he was obliged to rely on "traditions preserved amongst a few old families, together with their papers", especially the Portel and Farfan families whose ancestors had settled in Trinidad in the seventeenth century. After 1733, the Minutes of the Cabildo (the municipal body, based at St. Joseph up to 1784, thereafter at Port of Spain) were available to Joseph. These documents had disappeared by the time Borde began his research, and he correctly says that the chief value of Joseph's history lies in the few pages derived from them; Joseph himself comments "the naivete of these records, and the gravity of the Spanish language, render them as amusing as the Pickwick Papers". In addition to the Cabildo Minutes for the period after 1733, Joseph used the Minutes of the Council (set up in 1801) and other records of the British colonial government, legal documents, old proclamations, private correspondence of the last Spanish governor (Chacon), and family papers (Joseph, Preface; 139-40; 146-47; note 155). On the whole, though, Joseph's book has few claims to scholarship; and it contains many serious distortions and inaccuracies, such as his account of the founding of St. Joseph.

Like Joseph, Borde lamented the loss of precious records; the "local archives" had "disappeared", he wrote in 1876; family records "no longer exist"; "worms and fire have destroyed everything". He spent nineteen years gathering materials, mainly from chronicles, memoirs and published histories about South America since 1492, conducting research in Martinique, Venezuela, the US, France, Britain, Spain and Italy; he was unable to work in the Archives General of the Indies at Seville but expressed the hope that later historians of Trinidad would be able to mine "this vast field for historical research". Although the original Spanish Minutes of the Cabildo had disappeared, Borde relied heavily on "abstracts" in English prepared by James Meany for the period 1733 to 1813, a manuscript which was made available to him by his co-worker Fraser, who also used it extensively. For the period of French settlement (1776-97), Borde used several unpublished manuscripts, notably Roume de Saint-Laurent's *Considérations sur l'établissement d'une colonie en l'île de la Trinité*. Several important documents were printed in the appendices to the two volumes of Borde's work. In the last chapters of his book, dealing with the years after 1776, Borde frequently cites "family tradition" or "popular tradition", but the work as a whole is nineteenth-century "professional" history, Borde provided careful references, not to display his erudition, he wrote, but to allow his readers to judge the value of his conclusions by checking up on his sources. He frequently criticised his "authorities", and indicated why he chose one over another when they diverged on a particular point (Borde, 1, XXIII-XXXVI; 11, X-XIV, 415-72, 473-75). In many respects, Borde's work attains to the contemporary standards of academic history.

Since Fraser begins his narrative in 1781, the problem of missing or scanty documentation was less acute for him than for Joseph and Borde.

He used some "records" of Chacon's administration (1784-97), and the Meany "abstracts" of the Cabildo Minutes for the period 1781-1813. Another principal source were the Minutes and papers of the Council (1801-31), the Letter Books of Joseph Marryat, Colonial Agent for Trinidad in the early 1800s, and various Parliamentary Papers relating to Trinidad. The Port of Spain Gazette, which commenced in 1825, was extensively used by Fraser for the years between 1825 and 1839 (Fraser, 1, 6 ; 11, 11 ; 13-19 ; 20 ; 60-75). Throughout his work, Fraser includes long extracts from his sources, often whole documents ; some chapters contain more source material than his own text. His appendices, like Borde's, contain some useful documents in their entirety.

Though Joseph's fairly short book is confined more or less to events in Trinidad, both Borde and Fraser attempt to locate the island's history in its wider context. Much of the material in Borde's first volume, for instance, views Trinidad's development in the context of Spanish colonisation in the Americas generally. In Volume 11, he tries to explain the influx of French settlers by referring to events in the French Caribbean and in the "Ceded Islands", especially Grenada. Fraser, too, has an extensive discussion of French Caribbean history in the 1780s and 1790s (Fraser, 1, chapters 11-V1).

All three books, as one might expect, are basically narrative in form (Joseph's last chapters degenerate into an "annals" format). But none is devoid of analysis or reflection. In Joseph, indeed, the analysis is somewhat erratic, often consisting of unsubstantiated opinions or casual "asides". And, as Borde justly points out, Joseph's judgement is often distorted by his crude biases against the French settlers. Fraser attempts a fair degree of analysis, especially on two subjects dear to his heart : the evil influence of the "English party" on Trinidad, and the ending of slavery ; one is certainly left in no doubt about his views on those topics. Most of Borde's book consist of fairly straight-forward narration, but two impressive chapters at the end of each volume analyse the state of Trinidad's society and institutions, in 1622 and 1797 respectively. These excellent chapters discuss the formation of the island's cosmopolitan society, the relations between the different ethnic and class fractions, questions of race and race mixing, the Spanish influence on Trinidad's institutional life (political, legal, administrative, ecclesiastical), the growth and development of the main towns by 1797, the quality of life among French "habitants" of the 1780s and 1790s. There is much that is modern in these chapters.

These three nineteenth-century historians of Trinidad took differing positions on a few issues of importance to the society. One such issue was the role of the French settlers in the island's history. Joseph, taking an extreme "English" line, argued that most of the French immigrants were worthless folk who made the island disorderly and dangerous. Borde put forward what might fairly be called the "French Creole" view of Trinidad's history : an impoverished and deserted island had been transformed into a prosperous and civilised society by industrious and patriotic French settlers. Fraser, writing as an "adopted" French Creole, was somewhere in the middle but much closer to Borde than to Joseph.

In Joseph's interpretation, most of the French who arrived in the 1780s and 1790s were "fraudulent debtors" fleeing their creditors, slave

kidnappers, or disorderly yet cowardly Jacobins (or all of the above, presumably). Joseph states that the governor (Chacon) made a law by which the new settlers were exempt from any proceedings with respect to their debts during their first five years in Trinidad ; he adds, in a note, “ I have not succeeded in getting a sight of this law or regulation, but its existence is a matter of notoriety to living witnesses ”. (Borde severely chastises Joseph for this breezy statement, asserting no doubt correctly that no such law ever existed, or could have). As a result, says Joseph, Trinidad soon became the “ refuge of all the disgraceful characters in the West Indies... almost all the bankrupts in this part of the world ”. These were not “ honest insolvents ” but debtors deliberately seeking to defraud their creditors in their home islands. Others were “ knaves ” involved in kidnapping free coloureds or free blacks in the other islands and bringing them to Trinidad as slaves, or plain and simple slave-stealers. Thanks to Roume de Saint-Laurent’s “ cunning project ”, the island was, indeed, peopled ; but not with “ a population that would be faithful to their adopted king ” (of Spain). When French “ republicans ” began to flock to Trinidad after 1794, their disorderly and often violent behavior was a menace to the peaceable residents of all nationalities and to the Spanish authorities. Relying on “ eye-witness ” accounts, Joseph claims that the French “ republicans ” showed marked cowardice during the British capture ; having seized arms from the arsenal against the governor’s wishes, they fled to the woods as soon as they glimpsed the British troops (Joseph, 165-67, 191-95).

Needless to say, Borde was infuriated by these “ calumnies ” against “ our ancestors ” ; indeed, to refute them was one of his stated aims in writing his book. He attacks Joseph by name in several passages, accusing him of “ infatuation and ignorance ” for “ insulting our illustrious Coloniser ” (Saint-Laurent), and of deliberately writing untruths about the French settlers. His “ narrow nationalistic mind and great depth of conceit ” made his book a mere “ satire ” instead of a “ serious essay ” on Trinidad’s history (Borde, 1, XXV, XXXIV-V ; 11, 172)<sup>8</sup>.

In an impressive section of his last chapter, Borde eulogises the French settlers, often citing “ family tradition ” as the source for his statements. These immigrants constituted an elite “ more recommended by their quality than their numbers, distinguished particularly by their energy and their agricultural and commercial knowledge ”. They were known for “ open, easy and polite manners ” ; for their devotion to family life ; for their extravagant spending on their estates and their houses ; for their love of their adopted home (absenteeism was “ unknown ”). They lived in modest but gracious country houses. Though most men kept a mistress ( “ accustomed to the easy love affairs due to salvery ”), “ true libertines ” were rare, and the women were always pure and faithful. The

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8. An amusing indication of the gulf between Joseph and Borde is provided by their brief comments on the practice of duelling. Joseph calls it a “ pernicious practice ” carried on in Trinidad “ to a most disgraceful extent ”, mainly by the French, with high rates of injury and death. He applauds the efforts of Governor Woodford to suppress it. Borde sees it as part of the aristocratic life-style of the French creoles, who were “ excessively sensitive ; duels of honour were more frequent than in France... the slightest offence or a word sounding unpleasant, or a doubtful look, often provoked meetings at which blood was shed which was noble and generous ”. (Joseph, 107-08 ; Borde, 11, 308).

Creole ladies were paragons of virtue and good nature ; lavish hospitality was a tradition. This was a high-toned society. A “large part” of the families belonged to the old noblesse ; those who did not were “accustomed to command” because of slavery and formed in Trinidad “a veritable aristocracy of skin which conceded nothing in distinction to the aristocracy of blood”. There were no divisions between the white families ; they inter-married freely, and enjoyed a lively social and cultural life on their estates in the country and in Port of Spain. These were the people who, coming to a “desert and unproductive island”, created a “flourishing agriculture and a brilliant commerce” in just a few years. “We, who are the children of this country, have a sacred duty to render honour and thanks to these people... to these energetic pioneers”. (Borde, 11, 301-08, 341-42).

Fraser, who married a Creole woman of Corsican and Spanish descent and was related through his wife to many French Creole families, agrees with Borde that the noble and royalist French immigrants of the 1780s and 1790s were the real pioneers of settlement in Trinidad, the “nucleus of that refined society for which the Island has always been celebrated”. The “republicans”, however, were mostly “turbulent and intriguing men” who were, as Joseph said, a real danger to the peace and good order of the colony just before the British capture. Once they had been politically neutralised by the British regime, Fraser thought, the menace to social harmony came from “insolvent adventurers” flocking to the island from the other English colonies or from Britain. These new British settlers brought with them a virulent hostility towards the French and Spanish Creoles and the Roman Catholic Church to which the latter belonged. This was the origin of the “British party” (or the “English party”), the group, composed of resident Britons and Creoles of British descent, which wanted to reduce the influence of the “foreign” Creoles and eliminate the special position of the Catholic Church. Fraser believed that this group (which was ascendant in Trinidad’s political life between 1840 and 1865) was the source of most of the island’s social and political problems. Its members, the “ultra English”, wanted to treat all the “foreign” Creoles as “aliens” who should be excluded from any influence in the social or political institutions of the island. They had also tried to spread anti-Catholic bigotry and to brand the church of the great majority of the people as an “alien church” (Fraser, 1, 10-12, 136-37, 290-91 ; 11, 266-73, 286, 367-68).

While Joseph accused the French immigrants of being malcontents and adventurers, he was hardly more positive about the old Spanish settlers or their government. He portrays the eighteenth-century citizens of St. Joseph (the officers of the Illustrious Cabildo) as indolent, ignorant layabouts who picked quarrels with the governors and other officials because they could find nothing more useful to do. Though Borde criticises Joseph for his sarcastic tone, the evidence – the Cabildo’s own records – amply justifies his view. Borde adopts the same tone despite himself : “we have seen these dignified sons of Spain, and we shall continue to see them, in their rags, always superb and full of pride, and trying to dominate the metropolitan government of the island”. Borde and Joseph agree, however, that the Spanish were the most “humane” slave-owners in the Caribbean and, in particular, that the 1789 Cedula (decree) on the



treatment of slaves was a monument of wise legislation. Joseph calls it “the most liberal and humane law, for the government of slaves, that ever was enacted by any legislature in ancient or modern times”, especially when contrasted with the “wretched regulations and mockery of justice” which passed for slave laws in the Portuguese, British, French, Dutch and Danish colonies. “Let it said to the praise of the Spaniards”, Borde writes, “that they were the most humane slave proprietors”. But he gives credit for the 1789 Cedula to two French colonists of Trinidad, Saint-Laurent and Joseph de la Forest, who, he states, actually drew it up. In his view, echoing Joseph for once, it “cut right across the dragon-like legislation which applied to the slaves at the time” (Joseph, 147-59, 174-76 ; Borde, 1, 223 ; 11, 120, 194-202).

For Joseph, the Spanish government was generally inefficient, and incapable of controlling the turbulent population of French republicans and other malcontents ; Chacon had no choice but to surrender without a fight in 1797, and the British capture was clearly a blessing for Trinidad. Not suprisingly, Borde is more ambivalent. He refutes Joseph’s assessment of the French population in 1796-97 as mostly disorderly republicans ; in his view, though there were a few “hard-core” republicans, the great majority of the white and mixed-race immigrants were peaceable and non-political. Moreover, he harshly criticises Chacon for surrendering without any real resistance. If Chacon had armed the French-dominated militia, and accepted help from the republican authorities in Guadeloupe, he could have “done his duty” – attempted to retain the island for his King. It was his unjustified, almost paranoid mistrust for the French in Trinidad which caused him to “hand over the colony to the English”. Yet, in retrospect, the British capture and subsequent cession were “definitely a happy solution for the island”. Trinidad was spared the agonies of the Wars of Independence suffered by Venezuela or the revolutionary upheavals in the French colonies, and now (1883), “under the guidance of a strong and free nation”, had developed into “one of the most flourishing colonies in the sea of the Antilles” (Borde, 11, 236-52, 271-99).

Much as he admired the royalist French settlers, Fraser had no doubt that the British capture was both inevitable (in the context of 1796-97) and advantageous to the island. The Spanish regime was too feeble to control the volatile population during a dangerous international crisis. Trinidad needed a firm hand : rule by a soldier-governor representing a strong nation. This, of course, was Thomas Picton, the first British governor and a great hero to Fraser. Indeed, Fraser consistently argues in favour of authoritarian rule : Trinidad did best when she was governed by a “strong man”, a “governor in fact as well as in name”.

Picton, whose regime (1797-1803) was characterised by many atrocities against slaves and free coloureds, receives unqualified admiration from Fraser : “It is the manifest duty of an historian of Trinidad to clear the memory of its first British governor from the last vestige of the obloquy” he had undeservedly suffered. Granted the difficulties of the international situation, and the turbulent population he had to govern with inadequate military forces, only “measures of severity” could have kept Trinidad a British colony. None of these “measures”, however, were excessive or illegal : punishments such as burning alive, decapitation, mu-

tilation and branding (all authorised by Picton) were in "common use" in other colonies under British rule at the time. Only a "despotic" governor could have succeeded, Fraser concludes, echoing Picton's own defence of his actions (Fraser, 1, 107-53, 188-92). Joseph had taken more or less the same view of Picton; but he, at least, acknowledged that the soldier-governor had committed "real crimes or errors". Picton's severity towards the free coloureds was "injust and impolitic", and his permitting a "sanguinary tribunal" to inflict horrible punishments on slaves accused of obeah was an error if not actually a crime (Joseph, 204-16).

Fraser consistently argues in favour of authoritarian, if not arbitrary rule. He admires Ralph Woodford, governor of Trinidad between 1813 and 1828, for his autocratic style of government. In 1813, as in 1797, Trinidad needed a strong hand; Woodford was right to believe that "by absolute power alone could order and security be maintained" and oppression by the whites and revolt by the blacks be checked. Woodford was determined to be a true "Crown Colony" governor, and as a result he was able to lay the foundations for Trinidad's subsequent prosperity. Fraser was convinced that the need for authoritarian rule was by no means over. "Even in more recent times", he wrote in the early 1890s, "those periods during which the Colony has been blessed with Governors of ability and possessing energy enough to govern and to refuse to be governed, have been periods marked by progress and prosperity". He contrasted such rulers with the man who was governor in name only, who "ceases to govern and simply works out his time as pleasantly as he can". A strong governor, like Picton, Woodford, or his own patron, A. H. Gordon (1866-70), to whom Fraser dedicated his book, could keep the "English party" in check and protect the "foreign" Creoles and the Catholic Church. So convinced was Fraser of the merits of absolutism that he disapproved even of the modest grant (1831) of a Legislative Council with a few nominated "unofficial" members to represent the tax-payers. The Council, he believed, soon became "the instrument of placing power and patronage into the hands of a clique <ie the "English party">, which would never have been allowed in the days of Picton or Woodford". (Fraser, 11, 4, 52, 115, 119, 133, 213-14, 249).

Each of the three historians devotes considerable attention to slavery and emancipation, but there are clear differences in their perspectives. Joseph, the Englishman with (it seems) no significant ties to the slave-owning elite or to the white Creoles in general, shows no particular sympathy for the planters' cause, and acknowledges the hardships of the slaves. He unequivocally describes the punishments inflicted on slaves "convicted" of obeah or of rebellion as "horrors... painful to record" which could only serve to "brutalise the faculties of the slaves". He is sceptical about the "slave plots" which the planters from time to time "discovered" and "put down". After examining the papers of the courts-martial held on slaves implicated in a plot in 1805, Joseph notes that the principal evidence against them was given by "a mad woman" and concludes that "I fully believe that their judges were convinced of their guilt". The same tone of cool scepticism is taken by Joseph in relation to "obi" (obeah). Joseph, a man of the Enlightenment, declines to believe in its powers, and regards the "obi seekers...who believe that every fit of sickness, every pain or accident, is caused by obi" as much more damaging

to the colony than the “obi-men”. It was these “obi-seekers”, Joseph says, who made Picton authorise the “disgusting” punishments against slaves convicted of the practice. Joseph shows no sympathy for the slave-owners’ campaign against the attempts to “ameliorate” slave conditions in the 1820s, and praises the conduct of the ex-slaves at the time of emancipation in August 1834 (Joseph, 212-13, 229-30, 254, 249, 258-59).

Joseph’s scepticism, his detachment from the slave-owners’ world view even though he was writing just before the final end of slavery, finds no parallel in Fraser who was writing half a century later. Connected by marriage to many of the “old” slave-owning families, Fraser adopts their perspective almost entirely. He justifies the punishments inflicted on the obeahmen (and women) by pointing out that burnings, decapitations, mutilations and the rest were the norm in French and British colonies in the early 1800s. He has no doubt that the 1805 affair was a “diabolic plot” which, if not discovered and severely punished, “would have formed a terrible epoch” in Trinidad’s history. Prompt action by the authorities averted “misery, death and ruin upon hundreds of families”. True, the measures taken seem “unduly severe to a modern reader”, but they were absolutely necessary given the state of society in 1805 (Fraser, 1, 188-89, 267-72)<sup>9</sup>.

Borde presents what may be called the “French Creole” view of slavery in Trinidad: it was a mild, benevolent system run by patriarchal planters who managed their own estates. It was certainly necessary – “agriculture was impossible without adequate labour, and slaves were the only labour at that time” – but it brought little hardship to the slaves. These were “like grown children who had been handed over to their masters for instruction, and this comparison is far from being imaginary, as they formed part of the families of their masters”. Slave children were raised in the great houses along with the white family, and life-long attachments were the result. Thanks to Saint-Laurent’s 1789 Cedula, and the benevolence of the French planters, “conditions were actually paternal” in Trinidad, and the slaves showed no resentment, no desire for vengeance. (Borde, 11, 234, 311-14).

This pleasant fancy was echoed by Fraser, despite his stated belief in “diabolical” slave plots and sinister obeah poisoners. “Records of the old times and the traditions of those who can remember them”, Fraser wrote, showed clearly that, on the whole, the slaves “led a happy and contented life, enjoying certain well understood privileges and thoroughly knowing how to maintain them”. It was, indeed, a “benevolent and paternal” regime. Fraser is careful to condemn slavery on first principles (“no argument does or can exist for slavery as an institution”), but fails to condemn it at all as the system actually worked, in his view, in Trinidad. (Fraser, 11, 173-74).

Consistently with this perspective, Fraser is very sympathetic to the Trinidad slave-owners as they struggled to deal with the approach of

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9. In a note, Fraser compares the suppression of the 1805 “plot” (in which not a single white person was harmed) with that of the Indian Mutiny, when “new and terrible forms of punishment” had to be used to terrorise the sepoys. These measures which “saved India” were attacked, so too were those taken by the Trinidad authorities in 1805. Fraser, 1, note p. 268.

emancipation. Indeed, at times he comes very close to an outright condemnation of abolition, which, he wrote, "ruined hundreds of families, blighted the prospects of many once flourishing colonies and inflicted an immense amount of injury upon the very race it was intended to benefit". Fraser believed that the planters could not be blamed for their bitter opposition to the "amelioration" reforms, granted that they knew that abolition was the ultimate objective of the reformers, and abolition was "to the West India planter, synonymous with ruin". He provides an able and sympathetic summary of the pro-slavery argument, ending, somewhat ritualistically, "although no one it is to be hoped would now venture to uphold slavery as an institution". On the whole, the abolitionists come in for more criticism from Fraser than the Trinidad slave-owners, who are depicted as kindly masters overwhelmed by ruin through the agitation of sometimes well-meaning but ignorant and prejudiced anti-slavery men. The trauma of emancipation for the "old" families of the island is faithfully conveyed in Fraser's pages; so much so that he passes over the events of August 1, 1834, the Apprenticeship (1834-38), and August 1, 1838, in complete silence (Fraser, 1, 286; 11, 149-55, 173-80, 227-79, 239)<sup>10</sup>.

Yet, as Elsa Goveia has pointed out, Fraser's views were not especially racist when compared with other work on the Caribbean published towards the end of the nineteenth century. He concedes that "to attribute to the black race all the troubles and misfortunes that befell West India planters" after 1838 was "utterly unjustified and contrary to the facts"; it was wrong that this "unmerited stigma should be allowed to remain upon a whole class". Inevitably, it had taken many years after 1838 to teach the ex-slave to work without compulsion and the ex-owner to treat the black man as an equal, and "in the course of the necessary schooling much misery was experienced on both sides". But the ex-slaves had made real progress, justifying the abolitionists' efforts; Fraser even praises the work of the "industrious squatters" who had cultivated the neglected Crown Lands and whose titles were later regularised by Governor Gordon in the late 1860s. There is certainly a different tone here from the frankly racist pessimism about the ex-slaves and their children shown, for instance, by Carlyle and Froude (Fraser, 11, 372-77; 1, 286-87).

From the time of French immigration in the 1780s and 1790s, Trinidad had possessed a large and important community of "free coloureds", mostly descended from settlers from the French islands or Grenada. Borde described these people, or at least those who were estate owners, as forming "a second society on parallel lines and not less distinguished than the whites". Besides the free coloured planters, others were respectable, industrious artisans. Borde stated that up to the British conquest in 1797, no antagonism existed between the white and coloured proprietors: "we known from authentic tradition that at that time perfect relations existed between the two parties... governed by a reciprocal good

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10. In Volume 11, chapter XX, Fraser says literally not a word about the actual Act of Emancipation and its terms, or about the events of August 1, 1834. He moves from July 1833 to an episode in 1836 with the comment "very little worth recording took place during the next two years" (ie 1833 to 1836). Similarly, chapter XXII contains just one brief sentence about the Apprenticeship (it is described as an "unwise experiment"), and literally not a word about its end on August 1, 1838, marking the final end of slavery. Fraser, 11, 330-36, 355-36, 355-57, 372.

will". His readers would have understood his implication that under the British regime, relations worsened and the free coloureds found themselves more severely treated. Fraser indicates how this happened under the early British governors, and shows considerable sympathy for the free coloureds; he argues that the new regulations against them clearly violated the spirit if not the letter of the Articles of Capitulation. The Order which finally (1829) removed all the "disabilities" suffered by the free coloureds is praised by Fraser as a "very natural and proper Order" (Borde, 11, 309-11; Fraser, 1, 305-15; 11, 226-27).

Since much of his narrative dealt with the period of conquest and colonisation of Trinidad, Borde gives considerable space to the indigenous peoples of the island. He devotes a whole chapter to the Amerindians at the time of the Discovery, giving an interesting account which reflects the scholarly consensus of his day. Rather unusually, he is very sceptical about the Caribs' cannibalism, which he says is based on "purely fictitious stories", and he praises them for the "moderation and tolerance" of many of their customs. While Borde acknowledges the work and sacrifices of the missionaries who converted, and subjugated, Trinidad's indigenes, he criticises the missions for keeping the Indians isolated, indolent and dependent. By 1797, Borde believed, their situation was greatly inferior to that of the African slaves. Relegated to four missions, under the absolute rule of the magistrate and the priest, their numbers were dwindling from day to day so that only around one thousand still survived. They were in a state of "abject degradation", impoverished, usually drunken, promiscuous and "brutalised". Joseph writing in the 1830s, found them in much the same state, now all herded together in the single mission at Arima. These "harmless and inactive children of the island" were feckless and lazy beyond belief, sunk in torpor when not actually drunk, and fast approaching extinction through steady miscegenation (Borde, 1, chapter 111, 75-85; 11, 315; Joseph, 102-03).

Miscegenation, it might be argued, was intrinsic to the New World historical experience, and Borde has an interesting discussion of its role in Trinidad's social evolution. Perhaps unusually for a nineteenth-century writer who belonged to a white Creole family, Borde's perspective on race mixing is extremely positive. He thinks that the "race of mixed blood known by the injurious and improper name of mulattoes" (European-African mixtures) produced fine people; so did the mestizos (European-Amerindian) and the "zambos" (Amerindian-African). Borde wrote that it was "scientifically established" that race mixing in human beings, as in animals, sometimes produced people who were superior to their "parents"; and he noted that "an eminent anthropologist" had stated "with reason, that if America is destined to become one day the cradle of a new civilisation it is to hybridisation it will owe its greatness" (Borde, 1, 22-29).

For this kind of enlightened liberalism, contrasting markedly with several contemporary writers on the Caribbean, as well as for his scholarship, Borde deserves to be ranked first among the three nineteenth century historians of Trinidad. Taken together, the works by Joseph, Borde and Fraser, but especially the last two, had provided Trinidad by the turn of the century with a solidly researched narrative of its history between 1498 to 1839.