

COLONIAL GOVERNORS

SIR JAMES CARMICHAEL SMYTH



Not many Colonial governors of The Bahamas are remembered. Sir James Carmichael Smyth is one of the few about which most students of history and the general public have heard.

Smyth, who was born in London and educated at Charterhouse Schools and the Royal Military Academy, served as an engineer officer in South Africa and in Holland. He was on Wellington's staff at Waterloo. Knighted in 1821, he was appointed Governor of The Bahamas towards the end of 1829, a time when the heated question of the abolition of slavery was being debated both in the Imperial and in local colonial circles. Smyth, a sincere sympathiser with the cause of the slaves, was a keen abolitionist, and bucked the members of the Bahamian Legislature and influential whites more than once.

Especially keen to abolish corporal punishment for female slaves, Smyth tried without success to persuade the House of the Assembly to legislate against it. Early in 1830, Smyth became aware of a case of alleged cruelty towards several female slaves among a group of seventy-seven runaways from the estate of Lord Rolle in Exuma. The slaves, who had stolen a boat and fled to Nassau, were seized in Nassau Harbour and tried as runaways.

Justice Lees, not only tried the slaves in the General court, he also committed them to the workhouse where they were severely flogged as runaways. Smyth suspended Lees from the Council and also Mr. Duncombe, the chief Magistrate, who had passed the sentence.

Additionally, two other magistrates who had signed the warrant for the punishment of the female slaves were suspended.

Smyth's actions caused an uproar among the influential white class and also was opposed by House of Assembly members to whom he also appealed. Members argued that corporal punishment for women was almost extinct.

The matter came to a head over the Wildgoos affair. Wildgoos, a member of the House of Assembly, owned a retail liquor store in Nassau and was a slave owner. One of Wildgoos' female slaves received thirty-nine (39) lashes by an attendant of the town goal and was also confined there for a period. Additionally, Wildgoos caused a slave belonging to his mother to be similarly treated by in Smyth's opinion, Wildgoos' greatest sin was his visit to the prison about a month later to see his own slave whipped again without being released from prison.

Smyth, who saw this as a flagrant act of injustice appealed to the House against Wildgoos. In typical style, it refused to interfere, retorting that it was not their job to deal with Wildgoos but the Court's. The Assembly resented Smyth's interference. After Smyth sent a second message, the Assembly

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appointed a committee to inquire into the proceedings of the slave court. This report charged Smyth with interference in the administration of justice and requested Smyth's removal as Governor. A petition was drawn up and when Smyth received the message that the Assembly would conduct no further business with him, he dissolved the House on 31 May, 1831. Smyth received the support of the Imperial Governor in his action against Wildgoos.

However, while the Solicitor General saw Wildgoos' action as illegal, the Attorney General and Chief Justice took the opposite view, and the Grand Jury ignored bills of indictment against Wildgoos. Influential public opinion was building up against Smyth, but he had some supporters among some slave owners.

In June 1831, twenty-six large slave owners petitioned in Smyth's favour and praised him as a great humanitarian. Additionally, three hundred and seventy-six persons of colour also petitioned and congratulated Smyth, for advancing their freedom so far. A descendant of Smyth, Miss Sara Colville still has the silver cup which was given to the Governor by Bahamian "men of colour" for his efforts towards their welfare. Smyth was to evoke yet more hostility among influential whites against himself over the punishment of female slaves. His removal, for the second time, of two magistrates, Anderson and Duncombe, from the bench of the slave court, caused an attack by George Biggs, editor of the Bahamas Argus, a newspaper recently introduced from America and supported by Smyth's enemies in the House of Assembly.

Despite growing opposition towards himself in the House, Smyth urged its members to grant further privileges to the black and free coloured population. When the Amelioration Bill was introduced, the House of Assembly was in a truculent mood, and refused to consider any bill concerned with the matter while Smyth was Governor.

It argued that many enactments which the new order wished to enforce had already been included with consolidated slave acts. Refusing to deal with Smyth, the Assembly petitioned for his removal. Smyth then dissolved the House and took over the government of The Bahamas, ruling with the aid of the Council. The House of Assembly withheld the annual Revenue Bill and Smyth was forced to run the Colony on the salt and tonnage duties.

However, Smyth was soon to encounter opposition in the Council. Taking advantage of the absence of several members of that body, he appointed new ones who supported him. The Secretary of State for the colonies felt that Smyth's complaints against the Chief Justice, one of Smyth's opponents were unwarranted. The Colonial Office warned Smyth to tread carefully.

Not to be deterred, Smyth, in January 1833, expressed his intention not to call the House of Assembly until a year had elapsed. Already, during the previous years, there had been outbreaks of violence, and Penny, a Methodist Missionary, had reported that several skirmishes had taken place and some "blood was spilled."

After Smyth suspended two of the council members, more unrest occurred in Nassau. The situation reached near crisis conditions over another incident of a different nature.

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Six influential whites, trustees of the Nassau Public School, had in their possession some school supplies and refused to give them up. When the Attorney General took action to reclaim the books by filing a Bill in the Chancery, the trustees submitted, returned the supplies, but did so ungraciously and with such "disrespectful remarks" that Smyth, in his capacity as Chancellor, charged them with contempt of court. They were all sentenced to three months imprisonment and fined £50 (sterling), and while two apologized and were freed, the other four, including Lewis Kerr, the Solicitor General, and three members of the House of Assembly were imprisoned.

By this time, the Colonial Office was becoming worried about Governor Smyth. It warned him to separate his administrative duties and those as Chancellor. Smyth was unable to avoid conflict and confrontation for long. He soon clashed with the Attorney General and George Biggs, editor of the *Bahamas Argus*, wrote a scathing condemnation of the Governor.

Finally, in January 1833, Goderich informed Smyth that he had been transferred to the Lieutenant Governorship of British Guiana, in reality, a promotion. It is perhaps ironic, that Smyth before leaving The Bahamas, commissioned a statue of Christopher Columbus. It was later placed in front of Government House where it remains today.

Smyth, as he had admitted, had paid much attention to the amelioration and emancipation of the slaves and of the freed coloured population. He had been welcomed on his arrival by influential whites and members of the House of Assembly who were mainly Nassau shopkeepers. However, when he had showed sympathy towards the slaves, his popularity quickly evaporated.

Smyth was belligerent and forthright and tended to make personal enemies, but he was a man of principle. He was a humanitarian, and although he failed to achieve greater amelioration of slave conditions, he should be admired for his valiant efforts.

As governor of Guiana, Smyth saw the Abolition Bill successfully through the legislature. He oversaw the Apprenticeship System and minimised the hardships he could not remove. When he died (of a fever) in March 1838, the Government Secretary called him "the intrepid, the just, the singularly successful ruler of this not easily governed colony." Secretary of State Glenelg in reply said "there is no public functionary of the Colonial Empire at the present time whose continued services could have been of higher importance." These words, although meant for the Smyth as Governor of British Guiana, and not the Smyth of The Bahamas, must not be forgotten. Smyth in his effort to better slave conditions and those of the free coloured populations, must be seen as an early local hero.

The Carmichael Primary School was called after the area in which it is situated. It was named during the Governorship of Sir James Carmichael Smyth.