

James Ewing Ritchie

Thoughts on Slavery and Cheap Sugar



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Thoughts on Slavery and Cheap Sugar

In some papers this Pamphlet was advertised as published at Sixpence; it has been found, however, desirable to alter the price. To those who may discover coincidences of matter and manner between these pages and those of the Philanthropist, the Author has only to add, that having gone over much of the same ground in that Journal, he thought himself justified in introducing such facts as might be available here.

To the Members and Friends of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society

Gentlemen,

At the Annual Meeting of your Society, that has just been held, one of the most crowded you have ever convened, the able and eloquent advocate of free trade, George Thompson, succeeded in carrying an amendment, notwithstanding the avowed opposition of your officers and Committee; an amendment of the most essential importance, pledging you to the consideration of a subject that threatens to impair the usefulness, and to imperil the very existence of the Society you support. As a sincere well-wisher to that Society, as one eager with yourselves for the abolition of slavery throughout the world, the writer of the following pages beseeches you to peruse them in the spirit of anxious solicitude with which they were penned.

You must be aware, by the course you are pursuing, you are losing the sympathies of the popular mind. If you heed not what you are about, the results of last Friday's vote will materially impair your strength. You are already quoted by men who have no interests in common with the people; you are an authority in the mouths of Conservative statesmen: the advocates of monopoly, and bloodshed, and death, for the former implies the latter, tell us you sanction their proceedings, and smile complacently on their resort to measures that can only derive efficacy from the fact, that they are backed by the soldier's sword. Religious and peaceable men, as you are, with full faith, believing what reason and revelation alike teach, that truth – mere truth – simple and alone, is stronger than the iron arm of might, succumbs to no power, in heaven above, or on the earth beneath, how can you, how dare you, give the lie to the principles you profess, and ask the aid of government, which is based alone upon physical force? Think you, by the bayonet and ball, to ennoble your noble cause? Know you so little of earth's history, as for one moment to suppose that wrong ever became right, or that by the employment of means which error has used with success, you can obtain even the shadow of a gain for the sacred cause of truth?

Sir Robert Peel, the forlorn hope of rulers who have come into the world a century too late, and who obstinately continue to oppose the advancing stream, by which they will assuredly be swept away, has done you the questionable honour of alluding to you, as on his side, in opposition to the people's friends. How he abhors slavery, he has shown in the reduction he has announced in the duties on coffee, which employs three-fourths of the slaves in Brazil. Will this be no stimulus to slavery there? Or is the slave only the subject of your deep concern, when he is employed in the cultivation of sugar? The editors of the "Anti-Slavery Reporter" complain of being misrepresented, and blame Mr. Cobden for blaming them, as if they approved of the government scheme. But unfortunately you and the government have entered into partnership – Sir Robert Peel helps you, and you help him. It is the firm we find fault with. One member may not exactly approve of every thing his partner does, but he must bear it as best he can. We learn "from the ordinary channels of information," as "they say in another place," that Mr. Barber is very indignant at the idea of being made a sharer in the guilt of Mr. Fletcher, and his amiable accomplice, in the forgery of wills. We doubt not but that your Committee can quite sympathise in Mr. Barber's righteous indignation. If they wished to avoid the charge of hypocrisy, which may be fairly brought against the West Indian monopoly party in the House of Commons, they should have acted as Mr. Barber must wish he had acted – they should have refused to be made the tools of any man, or set of men.

This has not been done. The odium that attaches to the government is yours. The slave-holder would, ere now, have been driven from the market – he would have stood before the world blasted in character and worth, had you never descended from the high ground on which it is given the advocate of truth to stand – had you never pandered to political factions – had you never given to party "what

was meant for mankind.” The Tory press have come to your aid; and if you have the least regard for the great cause of which you are the pledged supporters, you will scorn the envenomed slanderers who supply what they need in reasoning, by the most vulgar and disgusting abuse. ¹ It would be well, too, if some of your own Committee who are connected with the public press, would pause ere they impute incompetency to consider the question to those who gave the verdict last Friday, at Exeter Hall. That they were beaten is no argument whatever why they should insult those who differed in opinion from themselves. The Editor of the *Patriot* thought otherwise, else why were we told the question was too abstruse for us to settle? Are we to wait till his powerful intellect has made it clear? Does he not know that while the Committee were continuing in the old routine, the public mind had arrived at an opposite decision? Men have learned at last that slavery can only be destroyed by freedom; that given, the right to buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest – and the employer of free men will soon be left alone in the field.

With these few remarks, gentlemen, the writer would commend the Thoughts on Slavery and Cheap Sugar to your most attentive perusal. The subject is of no common importance. If you are wrong, you are altogether wrong, and are a curse instead of a blessing – a curse to the slaves abroad – a curse to the negro on the coast of Africa, who is now murdered when he was before sold as a slave, and whom we would civilise and christianise by transporting to the untilled fields of Jamaica ² – a curse to the labourer at home, whose wretched existence you help to render more wretched still. Well may you shudder as you think of the responsibility you incur. Consider well your present course – momentous interests are at stake. Let your decision be calm and unprejudiced – not given in deference to well-meaning and respectable men – not from any uneasy sensation of annoyance or ill-will, but such as will be in accordance with the light you have. Your cause is a popular one, and you must be in a false position when you find yourselves opposed to the popular will. This one fact of itself ought to excite suspicion. Advocating as you do the rights and dignity of man, you and the creatures and champions of a fictitious aristocracy can have no common ground, and can never be found on a common side. To be amongst such men at all, you must have drifted from your moorings. Look well to it that you rectify this error in time.

One word about the pamphlet. It is written with no reference whatever to the government scheme. It is hardly worth while to attack a measure which surely your Committee will not defend – a measure which will merely drive slave-grown sugar from one market to another – a measure which opens the door abundantly to fraud, and to those immoralities with which fraud is always accompanied. The writer’s object has been to show that our past mode of procedure has not destroyed slavery; – that the adopting the principles of free-trade alone can do this; and that such a course would be a great national boon. All he aims at is the truth; and he should be happy to stand corrected when in the wrong.

That you, gentlemen, may calmly and seriously consider the momentous question discussed in these pages, and that the valuable Society, which has so many claims on your regard, may continue to exist and act with increasing power, till slavery be abolished, is the sincere wish and prayer of

The Author.

Camden Town, May 20, 1844.

¹ Vide the attack on George Thompson and John Bright, in the *Standard* of Saturday, May 18.

² Vide Report of Select Committee on West Coast of Africa. Part I.

THOUGHTS, &c

Eleven years have passed away since, at an enormous cost, slavery was abolished in the British dominions. The day that witnessed the act is one memorable in the annals of our country. It stands out conspicuously, and throws into the shade much over which the Christian and the patriot cannot choose but mourn. All honour be given to the men by whom it was carried. Let the fame and name of such benefactors of their race as Granville Sharp, Zachary Macaulay, William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, ever live fresh and fair in the remembrances of an admiring posterity. Theirs be the praise due to all who, through good and bad report, in faith and sincerity, give battle for the right, when weaker men are cowed down by might; and glorious is it to know that the words they spoke had in them life and power – that they reached the heart of England's millions, so that the cry for justice to the sons of Africa was borne as by the winds of heaven over the length and breadth of this thickly-peopled isle, and was heard in morning light and evening's shade, when man went forth to his work, or when he rested from the labours of the day, till at length Great Britain washed her hands of the stain she had contracted by her sanction of the accursed traffic in flesh and blood, and proclaimed freedom and manhood to the slave.

So far so good. Whatever imperfections may have attended it, it was a noble act – one of which we may well be proud; on the part of the many, it was done in sincerity and truth. The enlightened people of England considered it almost as a boon to themselves. There was joy and rejoicing at home as well as in the green islands of the west. When the morning dawned on which the slave, the black, stepped forth unchained and free, praise and thanksgivings burst from the lips of others than the long-oppressed descendants of Ham. It was the triumph of humanity; and man, wherever he lived, and whatever his lot, could well be glad.

Years have passed, and the people of England have not as yet reaped the benefit to which they were fairly entitled by the sacrifices they made. There is a monopoly in favour of West India produce, which deprives the working man of this country of an essential article of food. Slavery still remains, and, till that monopoly is abolished, will remain. Our abolition of it was regarded as an experiment by slave-holding states – an experiment which they now consider to have entirely failed. It is quite natural they should arrive at such a conclusion. What we have done has been but little. We have merely withdrawn from the slave-market our demand for slaves. It remains for us to show, that economically as well as morally we have made a change for the better; that the labour of free men is more productive than that of slaves. By keeping up our monopoly we practically declare the reverse. We supply the slave-holder with his strongest arguments against abolition; and, by giving him an advantage over us in the markets of the world, we afford a stimulus to slavery itself; and thus commit what we profess to abhor. Slave-owners are not remarkable for a high moral sense; could we show them that it was for their interest to emancipate their slaves, they would not be long ere they became our converts. As it is, we appeal to them in vain. To the voice of the charmer they are deaf. Even Lord Brougham's silvery tones and gentle pleadings fail to move and win; nor does Joseph Sturge meet with a better fate.

Slavery is a tremendous ill – an unmitigated curse; earth cannot produce its equal. Where it rears its hideous head, all that raises man above the beast, and makes life a thing to be desired, languishes and dies. Its state is dark as night – dreary as death – terrible as hell. For putting it down two plans have been proposed. It can be destroyed, it is said, by government interference, by treaties, by armed power. This has been tried; we shall now see with what effect. As soon as, in 1807, Parliament had passed a bill abolishing the British slave trade, by doing which we but did what was done in Denmark in 1792, the British ministers at all foreign courts were ordered to negotiate treaties for the abolition of the slave-trade. Mr. Laird tells us —³

³ Vide Colonial Gazette, Nov. 1842.

“They commenced with Portugal, after nine years’ labour, concluding a treaty in 1810. In 1815 Great Britain paid £300,000 for seizing Portugal vessels engaged in the trade up to the 1st June, 1814; and the same year gave up to her £600,000, for another treaty putting an end to the Portuguese slave-trade,” except for the purpose of supplying the transatlantic possessions belonging to the crown of Portugal. “In 1817, a third treaty was made, under which the Mixed Commission Courts and Preventive Squadron were established. In 1823, another treaty was brought forth.” In the mean while the trade carried on by miscreants of all nations, under the fraudulent cover of the Portuguese flag, became a disgrace to Christendom.⁴ “In 1889, the British Parliament took the law into their own hands, and passed an act authorising British cruisers to seize Portuguese vessels engaged in the slave-trade, and constituting British Vice-Admiralty Courts to condemn them. In 1842, this law was repealed, and a fifth treaty has been made with Portugal. We are therefore about to recommence the same round again with this power; though the increase of the trade under our former treaties was from 25,000 slaves in 1807 to 56,000 in 1822; and in 1839, forty-eight vessels, under the Portuguese flag (out of a total of sixty-one slave-vessels) were condemned at Sierra Leone.”

We next come to Spain. In 1814, we offered her a bribe of £800,000 if she would abolish the slave-trade at the end of five years. This she refused, but promised to prohibit the trade, except for Spanish possessions. In 1815 we got her to sign, with other powers, at the Congress of Vienna, a declaration “that the slave trade is repugnant to the principles of humanity and of universal morality.” In 1817, another treaty was got, on our paying £400,000 for it; and in 1822, a third; and “the sea swarmed with slave-ships, carrying on the slave-trade under the flag of Spain.”⁵ And so it continued until 1836, when the fourth, or Clarendon treaty was made; which Sir Fowell Buxton designates “an impudent fraud,” but which Mr. Bandinell thinks perfection, or as near perfection as a treaty can get. In it was embodied an equipment clause, by which a vessel with certain articles and fittings on board is liable to condemnation. This has had the effect of diminishing the trade carried on under the Spanish flag, but the number of slaves landed in Cuba does not appear to have been at all affected by it; forty-three vessels entering the port of Havanna, after landing their slaves on the coast of Cuba, in 1836; the annual average number in the next four years being forty-five.

“It appears, therefore, that for our £400,000 paid in 1817 we have got four treaties, under which the supply of the Spanish colonies with slaves has gone on as regularly as that of any other article of commerce, increasing and diminishing with the demand for them; that in the mean time we have, as slave-catchers for them, handed over to their tender mercies several thousand emancipados at the Havanna, who are a degree worse off than the slaves themselves; and our consul having contrived an ingenious plan to get back some of these poor people, has had his ‘exequatur’ withdrawn, and turned out of the colony.

“On the separation of Brazil from Portugal, negotiations were entered into to induce the Brazilian government to abandon the slave trade; and, in 1826, a treaty was entered into declaring it piracy, after 1830, when a mixed British and Brazilian court were to adjudicate on seizures. The greatest exertions were used to import slaves from the date of this treaty, and the vessels were consequently much more crowded than usual; yet, out of 150,587 slaves legally imported into Rio Janeiro between the 1st July, 1827, and 31st December, 1830, when it became a smuggling trade, the mortality on the middle passage was *only eight per cent.*

⁴ Bandinell, p. 222.

⁵ Ibid. p. 161.

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