

THE
REVIEWER REVIEWED.

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THE
REVIEWER REVIEWED;

OR
SOME CURSORY OBSERVATIONS

UPON
AN ARTICLE IN THE CHRISTIAN OBSERVER

FOR JANUARY 1816,

RESPECTING

The Slave Registry Bill.



IN
A LETTER TO A MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT,

BY
THOMAS VENABLES.

What compensation can be found for the absence of impartiality and
candour? *Christian Observer, Jan. 1816, p. 57.*

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THE
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" In all discussions which relate to the condition of our slave colonies, this
" inconvenience is very sensibly felt ; men reason respecting them upon
" analogies which have no foundation in truth, and therefore give an
" easy credit to assertions the most fallacious."—*Christian Observer*,
Jan. 1816, p. 32.

MY DEAR SIR,

IN the conversations we have had together on the subject of the Slave Registry Bill, I have ventured to assert, that the advocates for the bill have created a monster of the imagination, and have dressed it in every shape of horror, that they may the more easily reconcile the public and the legislature to measures which they recommend as necessary for the destruction of this chimera, but which have in
truth

truth other ultimate objects, the nature and extent of which they do not expressly develope: a contraband slave trade, prevailing in our colonies under the circumstances which their invention has painted, would be, as they truly tell us, an evil of greater magnitude than that regulated trade which we have abolished. Anxious as they are to find a firm ground for the first step in their projected career, and failing lamentably in matter of fact, they resort to allegations and inferences, the fallacious and illiberal nature of which is somewhat disguised by the garb of humanity with which they are clothed, and by the close connexion they affect with popular feelings. “*If we cannot prove the existence of illicit importation of slaves into the colonies,*” say these casuists, “*yet that practice is at least possible; while possible, it will be contemplated by the colonists; and so long as it is contemplated, the planters will maltreat and destroy their slaves.*” And this, they contend, although facts may fail them, is ground sufficient for their bill. In various productions of the press have these propositions

propositions been maintained, but in none with more boldness and virulence than in an article in the *Christian Observer* for January, which, amidst a long succession of observations, unfounded and most illiberal, has stumbled upon one or two just remarks, which I have selected and prefixed to this letter.

The article in question professes to review a pamphlet, which common fame attributes to Mr. Stephen, entitled, "Reasons for establishing a Registry of Slaves in the British Colonies, &c. &c. 1815;" and although the Reviewer is not sparing of eulogy to the author whom he pretends to analyse, yet (to prove himself a zealous disciple of the school to which he belongs) he does not content himself with mere approbation, but with the bitter animosity of one that has been sorely wounded in the contest, he adds his own large contribution of injurious misrepresentation, and in casuistry and in calumny leaves even his master at a distance behind him.

Both these writers appear to be aware that a penal law, so important in all its bearings as
that

that which they recommend, can hardly be justified to Parliament, except by the certified existence of some prevailing evil, against which it may provide a wholesome remedy; they pretend, therefore, that they possess a body of evidence of facts, of which, however, they equally betray their diffidence, by the superior importance which they endeavour to annex to what they call their *presumptive evidence*.

The master, in the arrangement of his forces, decently gives the precedence to that little strength of direct testimony which he boasts of possessing, and he brings up his presumptions and inferences in the second line; but the disciple, aware of the poverty of this display, reverses the order of battle, and places in the front his specious array of presumptive evidence. He asks his readers "on which side does the presumption of truth lie? Is it, or is it not, reasonable to believe? Is it at all improbable? and subsequently (for "*vires acquirit eundo*,") Does it require much evidence to prove? He winds up this part of his argument by an intimation, that from all these premises, he is entitled

titled to infer, that in order to justify the formidable measure he recommends, *it is not necessary to establish the fact of illicit importation* *.

Now, my dear Sir, I positively object to this manœuvre of the Reviewer, as contrary to all the established laws of logic, equity, and fair dealing. If the *fact* of colonial participation, and under circumstances warranting a presumption of general reliance upon illicit trade, "*as a potential resource,*" cannot be established, all this presumptive evidence of the pamphleteer, and of his Reviewer, so far from tending to prove the *guilt*, furnishes strong indications of the *innocence* of the accused colonists. We shall be compelled to acknowledge, that while the planters have remained faithfully obedient to the law of abolition, and subjected to its inevitable effects, they have had the merit of resisting the temptation, and opportunity for doing otherwise.

And this consequence will implicitly be admitted

* Christian Observer, p. 40 and preceding.

mitted in cases where we are able not merely to repel the charge, but to establish, by direct evidence, the contrary fact. If Jamaica, for instance, can shew to our satisfaction, that it has not, in a single instance during the last eight years, been contaminated by the alleged guilt, having, mean time, had its temptations and facilities in common with all the other islands, we must fairly acknowledge, that to one-half our colonial territory the calumnious imputations of the Reviewer and of his author do not in the smallest degree attach.

What, think you, would be the general feeling, if an individual were put upon his trial, by a course of proceeding like that of the Reviewer? This “man is charged with felonious practices; “we cannot prove the fact, but we can shew “you that he is *poor*; that he uses, and sometimes wants, the articles which he is accused of stealing; that such articles have been “lying conveniently in his way; and that the “chances of detection were in his favour.” Such a process, you are well aware, could not be heard before any English tribunal.

Nor

Nor indeed (to do the accusing party justice) do they rest their presumptive evidence here, for they endeavour to persuade us that the accused is, in this case, destitute of every principle which could controul his criminal propensities; the terror of the law, or the compunctions of conscience, are by him equally unfelt. And these injurious inferences are supported upon the grounds, that planting in the West Indies is an uncertain speculative adventure; that before the abolition of the slave trade, the planters purchased, and that they do yet possess slaves; and that, during the period when the African slave trade was pronounced by the law of Great Britain to be "necessary" for the cultivation of their properties, they opposed, on various pleas, its abolition.

Agriculture, it seems, in Britain, affords a steady, unvarying profit; but in the colonies it is a lottery. The West India planter is a gamester, a character reprobated by every code, however lax, of morals. But the West Indian is not merely a gamester; he is, generally speaking, an insolvent gamester; and there is nothing

thing uncharitable in imputing, to such a character, a selfish pursuit of his own ends, by means of oppression and cruelty*.

Will the British farmer, think you, acquiesce in the justice of this contrast? I apprehend not. Agricultural pursuits, in every climate, are subjected, like other human concerns, to a variable success; and more especially so during revolutionary periods like those which the political world has experienced for a quarter of a century past. That the colonies, during a part of that period, have laboured under an accumulation of difficulties, and that plantations in the West Indies are occasionally visited by calamities of a peculiar nature, it were useless to deny; but under a pressure so long and so great as that which they have recently experienced, did the marks of general insolvency appear? Or is it true, that rarely has a large body of men, either agricultural or commercial, sustained so firmly the continued attack of complicated adversity?

It

* Christian Observer, p. 34 and 35.

It would be quite unfair to give the Reviewer's further presumptive evidence, resting upon the character of the planters, in any language but his own.

“ That the terror of punishment and infamy
 “ will often restrain those who know no other
 “ fear, is unquestionably true; if it were not
 “ so, human legislation would be an idle
 “ mockery. Yet the efficacy of penal laws,
 “ upon the conduct of those who acknowledge
 “ no higher and more generous obligation, is by
 “ no means certain. Now, with respect to the
 “ crime of slave trading, one thing is quite
 “ clear, that not only the great mass of society
 “ in the West Indies, but a large number of
 “ persons in this country, consider it as no
 “ crime at all. Nine years have not elapsed
 “ since they proclaimed this opinion loudly and
 “ earnestly. In the Parliament of Great Bri-
 “ tain this doctrine was supported by advocates
 “ of high rank and great public consideration.
 “ In the colonial assemblies, not a solitary voice
 “ was raised to oppose it. In addresses, in
 “ speeches, in votes, and resolutions, the slave
 “ trade

“ trade was there justified, nay, applauded, as
 “ an excellent scheme for mitigating the horrors
 “ of African bondage. The same things are
 “ not said now, it is true; no man who should
 “ adopt, and promulgate as his own, the opi-
 “ nions of the late council and assembly of Ja-
 “ maica on this subject, would find admittance
 “ into decent society. But why suppose this
 “ silence the result of conviction? For what
 “ reason are those, who, under the constrain-
 “ ing power of an act of parliament, and no
 “ less-constraining force of public opinion, de-
 “ part from the profession of faith of the West
 “ Indian legislatures, entitled to unreserved
 “ credit? Has any argument been advanced
 “ since the year 1806, which had not been
 “ reiterated before? Have any new facts been
 “ discovered—or has any new light broken in
 “ on them since that time? If we give these
 “ men credit for the sincerity of their past pro-
 “ fessions, what motive, except the dread of
 “ punishment, can now prevent their conti-
 “ nuance of the practice they so lately defended
 “ and extolled? How far, then, is this fear
 “ likely

“ likely to operate? Just so far as the law can
 “ be enforced with vigilance and rigour. Like
 “ any other felon, the slave trader will calculate
 “ the means of detection and his chance of
 “ escape, and will act accordingly.”

And a little further, “ In this situation, is the
 “ chance of detection, of accusation, or of con-
 “ viction, very formidable? Is it sufficiently
 “ so to restrain men, who, by their own re-
 “ peated avowal, acknowledge on this subject
 “ no restraint of conscience?”

Now I ask you whether the utmost stretch of
 Christian charity will admit of a belief that this
 writer is unaware of the gross delusion which
 he is here practising upon his readers, many of
 whom he must presume to have no retrospect
 to the changes which time has produced both in
 laws and opinions? and I must be permitted to
 doubt the sincerity of that wish with which he
 commences his criticism, “ that some person
 “ competent to the task would write a *full and*
 “ *impartial* history of the abolition of the slave-
 “ trade*,” since such a history could not be writ-
 ten

* Christian Observer, p. 28.

ten without a fair display of the sanction which that trade, not many years ago, received both in the opinions of wise and good men, and in the positive enactments of the British legislature.

Let not the purport of this observation be mistaken, nor what is here said be cited in justification of the calumnious assertion, that the opposers of the Registry Bill are advocates for a renewal of the slave trade; parliament and the nation, after a long and patient hearing, have pronounced its sentence; and I do not know the solitary individual existing who does not wish that, by the general concurrence of all the European powers, Africa may be seen exerting her native energies, after having been freed from any contact of that trade: but if the colonists who opposed the abolition of the slave trade can therefore fairly now be said to acknowledge “no higher and more generous obligation than that of penal laws—no restraint of conscience;” and that we may presume them guilty whenever they are tempted to be so, there is no contumacy, against present law or
universal

universal justice, in maintaining that under the same sentence must be included all those statesmen and legislators, from the time of Queen Anne downwards, who after deliberately considering the "nature of the trade," not only provided for it express encouragement in our statute book, as "advantageous to Great Britain, " and necessary for supplying her plantations " and colonies with a sufficient number of negroes at reasonable rates*," but who, in another instance, even considered, as an advantageous article of a treaty with his Catholic Majesty, the concession of the Assiento contract, as it was called, by which we contracted for a supply, by British trade, of 144,000 slaves to the Spanish colonies. Every nobleman and gentleman who, during twenty years, in either house of parliament, spoke or voted against the abolition, are comprised also under this sweeping moral condemnation.

To readers of "The Christian Observer," it were needless to remark, that neither in the Old

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* 23 Geo. II. cap. 31. Preamble.

or New Testament can any precept be found which forbids the purchase and possession of slaves, or the use of their labour in their bondage; the authority, indeed, leans the other way; and our holy religion seems to discourage all attempts at officious interference respecting the civil and political relations of men.

In morality a man can seldom go wrong while he is strictly obeying that which is directed by the laws of his country; and you will recollect that Horace gives this rule indefinite latitude—

Vir bonus est quis ?

Qui consulta patrum, qui leges, juraque servat.

The colonist who ten or twelve years ago endeavoured to add advantage to *Great Britain* by purchasing slaves for the purpose of increasing the produce of his estate, was, under this rule of action, doing his duty; and in 1807 he was, by the same authority, enjoined to abandon all reliance upon a further supply of slaves from Africa, and to manage his property as advantageously as he could with his present stock.

I confess myself utterly unable to guess upon
what

what authority the Reviewer advances the following assertion:—

“ The case is shortly this. In the colonies, and in this country, there is a large body of persons, planters, merchants, ship-owners, and mariners, who conceive they have a deep and permanent interest in the continuance of this traffic; who, by their own avowal, are withheld by no scruples of conscience from embarking in it; who can be restrained from such speculations by nothing but the fear of detection; and who, by artifices that are obvious and easy of execution, may evade that danger*.”

To his round affirmation I can only oppose as round a denial. I have, as you are well aware, an extensive acquaintance with the colonies, and the various classes connected with them, and I know of no such *persons, planters, merchants, ship-owners, or mariners*, as those here alluded to, or whose conduct is regulated by such “*speculations.*”

Why, it may be fairly asked, did the colonists

* Christian Observer, p. 36.

so long and so pertinaciously oppose the abolition? was it not under a conviction that the law, when passed, must bind them? When Mr. Brougham, in 1810, introduced his bill, making all participation in the trade felonious*, was he not supported by the colonial party in the House of Commons? one of whom†, (who voted in the small minority of 1807 against the abolition) is reported to have said, “that if he had
 “ at another time objected, on the ground of its
 “ inexpediency and impracticability, to a mea-
 “ sure *which was not then the law of the coun-*
 “ *try*, he knew what was now his duty, in defe-
 “ rence to what *is* the law of the country.” It must be left to the Reviewer, and to those who adopt his uncandid judgments, to pronounce that these ought not to be taken as the sentiments of the colonists generally, until facts shall be brought to warrant a contrary conclusion.

And *facts*, the Reviewer too tells us boldly, he will produce. *Parturiunt montes!* lo! we have a doubtful case of one poor negro boy in
 St.

* 51 Geo. III. cap. 23.

† Mr. G. Hibbert. See Cobbett's Debates.

St. Kitts: a newspaper advertisement in Santa Cruz, offering rewards *for the detection* of illicit trade: and *again* appears the case of the census in Trinidad, although his fellow-labourers, the Edinburgh Reviewers, have told him that it will not stand the test of examination; but, no matter! the pious readers of the Christian Observer may shun the heterodox pages of the northern journal, and the story tells well; as it charges a good round amount of illicit trade, which may compensate for the puny exhibition of Charles, the negro boy of St. Kitts.

If this will not do, there is still the resource of *promising* facts, which for certain reasons cannot yet be revealed. These the African Institution will produce in its own good time. The *little* island of Nevis is threatened to be implicated for *its full share* in the discovery. The Reviewer has seen the documents, and he pledges his veracity to his readers that they afford the most *ample, precise, and convincing* proof, that within the last four years, and especially in the year 1814, the practice of smuggling

gling negroes has been carried on to a considerable extent in *several* islands.

From what cause offences committed in 1814, and which admit of such proof, have not already been detected and punished, we are yet to learn; and the accused planters have to lament, that at least the *cases*, if they be not among those which are already reported to Parliament, have not long ago been *stated*, as an opportunity would have thus been afforded for investigating the facts and the circumstances. You, my dear Sir, may rest assured that the instances of illicit trade, which are to be so *amply, precisely, and convincingly proved*, are totally unknown to all the principal proprietors of West India property in and about London.

It is the *colonial mind*—it is the *general contemplation* of these practices “as a potential resource,” and the influence which that contemplation must have on the management of slaves, that are presented to us as evils imperiously demanding this strong legislative remedy; and against such arguments the single fact that
 Jamaica

Jamaica is not implicated, is in *itself* a host. Santa Cruz is no longer ours; Trinidad is already subjected to a registry; and if it should be true that felony has been committed in Nevis or in St. Kitts, let us see whether the guilty cannot be punished, without the mighty movement by which we are now invited to convulse all our old colonies.

I pass over all the details by which the Reviewer and his author have, in a spirit of gross illiberality, endeavoured to misrepresent the general condition of the slaves, and the laws of manumission; not because the fallacious character of their remarks does not deserve animadversion and admit of refutation, but because these subjects are but remotely, if at all, connected with the Registry Bill. If the abolition be generally an effective law, and so considered, (which I contend to be the fact), its influence is operating, and this formidable innovation is not requisite for its support.

I leave too entirely out of consideration the question which this Reviewer has largely discussed of constitutional right; let him enjoy
without

without molestation his triumph in the *power* by which that right, if asserted, can be repressed! The British Legislature will doubtless consult its dignity rather than its power, and its decision will probably rest upon the questions of necessity and of expediency; other evidence than that of this Reviewer, or of the author he eulogises, will be received as to the facts of illicit trade and of oppressive practices; as to the competency of the local legislatures for all the purposes of internal government; and as to the progress already made in ameliorating the condition of the coloured population, whether slave or free.

The spirit which animates the Reviewer cannot be better exposed than by his own suggestion of the means of furnishing the legislature and the public with new information upon these subjects, and I will give it to you in his own words:—

“ One suggestion, however, connected with
 “ this topic, we beg leave to submit to the
 “ African Institution. Hitherto all the evidence
 “ given to the public on the interior condition
 “ of

“ of the slave colonies has been derived from
 “ the white population—from those against
 “ whom the charge of oppression is advanced.
 “ But there will be found in the islands a large
 “ number of persons of colour, whose liberal
 “ education and extensive acquaintance with
 “ the state of West-Indian society, eminently
 “ fit them to assist in forming an accurate de-
 “ lineation of it. If a fund were raised for
 “ bringing over to England a few witnesses of
 “ this class from each of our slave colonies, a
 “ body of testimony might be collected of in-
 “ calculable value. There are at present in this
 “ country more persons than one of this num-
 “ ber, from whom we have received communi-
 “ cations as to the recent proceedings of the
 “ white colonists, to which it is impossible to
 “ listen without horror and indignation*.”

What, let me ask you, can be the character
 of evidence thus obtained? A free person of
 colour who came over on these terms must be
aware

* Christian Observer, p. 57.

aware of the nature of those opinions which would be acceptable to his employers; and he would be one too who, bankrupt in property, and hopeless of resources in the colonies, made no sacrifice in abandoning that residence for ever. Irritated, perhaps, by personal resentments and by disappointed speculations, he would earnestly look up to his purchasers and employers for an establishment; the best means of obtaining which he would not unreasonably conjecture to be abuse of the government and of the society which he had relinquished.

Can such a suggestion be dictated by a candid and impartial mind? is this the spirit of fair investigation? or is it the precept of an inquisitor who has already condemned and wants a colour for injustice?

Other indications are not wanting of the disingenuous mind with which the original author and his Reviewer have advocated their cause; their coarse, indiscriminate abuse of all the colonial legislatures (that of Jamaica included), and their utter silence as to what has been recently

certainly done in this our greatest colony in favour of the free people of colour, are at variance with all candid discussion in the pursuit of truth.

The Reviewer has passed lightly over the accusation which his author, with triumphant indignation, brought against the colonies—that of not attaching the slaves to the soil. We were assured by the author of “Reasons, &c. &c.” that, setting aside all other instances of a spirit directly opposite to the spirit of abolition, it would be *singly enough* to say, that this measure had not yet been adopted in any of the islands.—“It is,” he tells us, “a *sufficient indication of the fact he wishes to establish*, that “plantation slaves are not yet annexed to the estate they cultivate, so as no longer to be severed from it by execution at law*.” Has the Reviewer been aware that this choice of a *test of the colonial mind* was unfortunate, as the circumstance selected will be shewn to have been strictly consistent both with prudence and humanity? But while the Reviewer forbears
to

* Reasons, &c. &c. p. 48.

to give that peculiar importance which his author had given to this accusation, he might have offered some apology for the positive and opprobrious terms in which it was charged against the colonies.

Neither the Reviewer nor his author can be ignorant of the amelioration of opinions, manners, and laws, which in the last twenty-five years has taken place in our colonies, and which is still in progression; they cannot believe that the condition of our West-Indian slaves is the “most extreme and abject slavery that ever degraded and cursed mankind*,” that “they are subjected, by solemn legislative enactments, to punishments most severe and humiliating for the slightest offences;” that “over these wretched captives a few Europeans, like Huggins and Hodge (or like those who live in courteous association with such characters), exercise an unlimited authority, legislative and domestic;” that “life presents to them no better hope than a refuge to that last sanctuary

* Reasons, &c. &c. p. 4.

“ tuary where the wicked cease from troubling
 “ and the weary are at rest*.” These things
 they assert, but they cannot believe them; for
 where they have raked for their calumnies,
 truth must have stared them in the face, and
 they cannot be ignorant that, generally speak-
 ing, the slaves in our colonies are contented in
 their situation; that their labour is lighter far
 than millions of men in Europe gladly undergo
 for their daily bread; that their food, their
 clothing, their punishments, are subjected to
 legal regulations, and that both in the laws by
 which they are governed, and the humane spirit
 by which those laws are administered (and which
 pervades too the exercise of the masters’ discre-
 tionary power), their condition has been during
 many years past in progressive amelioration.

Neither can we admit that these gentlemen
 are ignorant that the abuses against which they
 professedly direct their Slave Registry Bill are
 either creatures of their imagination, or, so far
 as they can possibly be proved to exist, are in
 nature

* Christian Observer, p. 44.

nature and degree insufficient to justify a proceeding so rash and violent. But those who consult the author of "The Reasons, &c." and his Reveiwer, will be at no loss to discover that the measure of a general registry is a matter of indifference, except as it is one step (and a bold one too) in the disfranchisement of our colonial législatures, who, however prudently attentive to extend protection and privileges to the different classes of the population under their jurisdiction, might and would probably, stop short of any direct measures of general emancipation.

That our Reviewer has reconciled his mind to the accomplishment of that purpose, and at no great distance of time, you will discover by his triumphant allusion to the glorious state of St. Domingo, and by the decent terms in which he points it out to the legislators of Jamaica, at the very moment when he had reason to expect the result of their anxious investigation of every matter connected with the professed objects of this bill. "Even now a negro empire is rising
 " in the Caribbean Seas, in fearful strength and
 " energy.

“ energy. The *slave-drivers* of Jamaica may
 “ yet strut their hour as legislators, and publish
 “ their childish boasts of independence; but
 “ they have, in King Christophe and President
 “ Petion, near neighbours, who may ere long,
 “ if they heed not the calls of mercy and jus-
 “ tice, address these blusterers in a style yet
 “ more peremptory than their own*.”

That the Reviewer heartily wishes to see all the negroes of Jamaica as free and happy as the subjects of King Christophe now are, and the white population disposed of by means like those which extinguished that class in St. Domingo, and all the public and private wealth which Jamaica now produces sacrificed, as that of St. Domingo has been, I will not positively affirm, but I will venture to assure him that a speedier way of accomplishing those purposes cannot possibly be adopted than by the disfranchisement of those “blustering legislators,” of whom he speaks with so much unbecoming levity, and whose *hour* (as he is pleased to call it)

* Christian Observer, p. 58.

it) is certainly come, whenever the British Parliament is induced to pass the Registry Bill.

I am, &c. &c.

THOMAS VENABLES.

P. S. I have just learnt that the legislature of Jamaica has sent home a Report and a body of evidence, which is printing, and which, so far as relates to that great colony, will afford a complete refutation of those calumnies which the Reviewer has so industriously endeavoured to propagate and to justify.

FINIS.

