

**AN ADDRESS TO THE
MEMBERS OF BOTH HOUSES
OF PARLIAMENT ON THE
WEST INDIA QUESTION**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649482122

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Alexander M'Donnell

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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ON

THE WEST INDIA QUESTION.

BY ALEXANDER M'DONNELL, Esq.

LONDON:

JAMES RIDGWAY, PICCADILLY.

1830.

ADDRESS.

HE who has marked the progress of political controversy, must be well aware that there are times much more favourable than others for impartial discussion ; and that the establishment of truth, or of correct legislative views, frequently depends more upon a certain susceptibility of the public mind, than upon the cogency of reasoning with which those views are supported. Every political question is connected with long-cherished associations, and with many contingent relations, which induce us to lend a favourable ear to arguments which harmonise with our predominant passions, and to regard those of an opposite character with repugnance. In the progress of enquiry, first impulses are weakened ; new relations arise ; the appearance of things themselves is changed ;

clearly evincing the expediency of delay in legislation, as much to enable us to view the object proposed through a correct medium, as to allow the passions of heated disputants to subside. History teems with instances where great changes have been effected; where signal advantage has been obtained by one class, unmerited calamity suffered by another; solely from the peculiar juncture at which a widely-spread and uncontrollable excitement amongst the people extended its influence to the legislature. A short time sooner the feelings would not have been sufficiently animated to have sanctioned extensive innovation; a few years later the cooler dictates of the judgment would have checked the rising fervour, or have allowed it to spend itself without inflicting injury.

To the West India question these remarks pre-eminently apply. There is reason to believe that this long-agitated controversy will occupy a prominent part in the proceedings of the ensuing Session of Parliament; and before we enter on a succinct examination of those points which yet remain undecided, it may be useful to take a retrospective view of the causes which a short time back led to so loud an expression of hostility against the colonies—to enumerate the contested points which have been set at rest—and to state

the reasons for believing that public opinion has acquired a more deliberative tone, and has undergone some change in favour of the West Indian interests.

The well-known Resolutions of 1823, which form the groundwork for colonial legislation, were passed at a period of great commercial, political, and intellectual excitement. All the scars of a long-protracted war seemed to be effaced. The nation was supposed to be advancing with a rapidity unparalleled in her most prosperous annals. The momentous services she had performed, and the high station she had attained amongst neighbouring states, gave her, it was conceived, vast additional means for wielding her natural resources with effect; and in the buoyant heedlessness of prosperity, a desire arose totally to change her system of commercial policy; a change which, in principle, implied the inutility of her colonies and those distant possessions which had been mainly conducive to all her successes.

It was at this moment that the cry for the abolition of slavery was loudly heard. The powerful influence of the party who called it forth, their systematic organization, their zeal, their activity, and the recklessness of purpose with which they put all their extended machinery in motion, and at the same time the undeniable popularity which some of their leaders had

acquired as having been serviceable to the cause of civil liberty at home, had a prodigious effect in raising animosity against the West Indian cultivator. At any time a cause so advocated, and sanctified by the imposing name of humanity, must have commanded deep attention throughout the country ; but under the altered notions of commercial intercourse then prevalent, which taught that all the advantages derivable from colonies could be equally well, perhaps better, obtained from independent countries, the government and the legislature, without taking time for proper deliberation, conceived themselves impelled to action, to satisfy the supposed desire of the nation for the extirpation of slavery.

Considerations of self-interest actuate nations as well as individuals ; and the labour of investigation is always most successful when it is shown that the result vitally touches the public welfare. The speculative lecturer at a university may harangue against the turpitude of permitting at any time the cupidity of commerce to clash with the claims of distant right or disinterested justice ; but with the great majority of the nation, and even with our most enlightened and virtuous statesmen, these sentiments are materially modified. Political expediency is made the rule of legislation more from necessity than from choice. No nation stands wholly iso-

lated, uninfluenced by the policy of its neighbours. No one is sufficiently powerful to compel others to imitate its views. It thus frequently happens, that measures which we are apt to censure as having been dictated by a flexile expediency, in reality consult the purest principles of moral right which the mixed institutions of life will possibly permit. It is, therefore, not only natural but commendable for the public to look to their own collective interests in judging of the colonial question. When they are thoroughly convinced that the welfare of the mother-country is identified with the welfare of the colonies, we have a sure guarantee against precipitancy; and it is this increasing conviction, and our moderated commercial notions generally, which inspire the hope that the day of unsparing hostility against our distant fellow-subjects is past.

Since 1823, considerable changes have taken place. The sanguine anticipations of many zealous advocates for free trade have been materially abridged, if not entirely dissipated. It is now clearly ascertained that there is no chance of foreigners acceding to our views of commercial reciprocity; that it is vain to expect the distracted states of Mexico or Columbia, or any other country, to compensate for the supercession of our colonial trade; and that if our

colonies are once lost, we shall never replace our present extended navigation, or maintain our political importance with foreign nations.

It is not amongst the mercantile community alone that these sentiments prevail. Many members of the legislature attached to that party which boasts of exclusive liberality, and many writers of consideration who have not been committed by previous declarations, and whose vanity or self-love is thus in no danger of being shocked by the acknowledgment of former errors, are well known to regard the preservation of the colonies as the chief object of commercial policy, in the existing state of our foreign relations. An illiberal combination against British industry manifests itself in all quarters of the world. That combination we can best correct by showing, in every negotiation, that we have more advantages to give than we can expect to receive. In the distressed condition of our people, the destruction of any extended portion of extraneous trade would produce domestic convulsion. Present security, and future prospects, are virtually at stake; and they must take precedence of every consideration touching either planter or slave.

But if the maintenance of our colonial commerce be thus paramount, greatly must our desire to preserve it be increased when we