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978-1-108-02436-5 - The Opportunity: Or Reasons for an Immediate Alliance with St. Domingo

James Stephen

Excerpt

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THE
OPPORTUNITY.

TO THE
 RIGHT HONOURABLE
 HENRY ADDINGTON,
 CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER, &c. &c.

SIR,

NEAR two years ago, I publicly addressed to you some reflections on West Indian affairs, in a pamphlet entitled, *The Crisis of the Sugar Colonies*.

Had the opinions maintained in that publication been refuted by intermediate events, it would have been unreasonable to expect from you at this period, a favourable or a patient attention; but if, on the contrary, those opinions have been since strikingly verified by experience, I may, without presumption, claim a second audience on the same interesting subject.

Nor will it weaken this pretension, if you should be able to recollect, that the author's views were thought on their first promulgation, to be singular, and his practical conclusions rash: for the tes-

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timony of experience in their favour is not the less decisive ; and when political suggestions are demonstrated to have been just, their singularity and apparent boldness become arguments of their necessity and importance.

Unless vanity deceive me, that publication, however diffidently received by yourself or your colleagues, was not wholly fruitless of some important public effects.

Though personally a stranger to you, I know that you honoured the work with a perusal ; and would hope that it contributed in some degree to fix you in a line of conduct in what relates to St. Domingo, from which you have had much excitement to swerve, but of which the wisdom as well as the rectitude, is now universally acknowledged.

If so, my claim to your patient attention rests upon a still stronger title than that which has been already advanced.

To my former advice, much popular prepossession certainly stood opposed ; and as I have now to offer further counsel, suggested by the same views, to which, perhaps, in some points, the current of public opinion may still be adverse, a brief retrospect of some of the leading opinions maintained in " The Crisis," and of the experimental confirmation which they have received, may be no improper or unnecessary prelude.

After

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After offering many reasons for believing that the ostensible purpose held out by the French government was not its real object in the great expedition then proceeding against St. Domingo, but that the restitution of private slavery was the Consul's true purpose, I endeavoured in that pamphlet to point out the peculiar obstacles, both physical and moral, by which the accomplishment of that purpose would be opposed *

In delineating these, it was found necessary to adduce facts relative to colonial slavery, of which the true nature was generally misconceived in Europe †; and here, to some minds celebrated for political knowledge in general, as well as to many ordinary readers, the author's premises, as he has reason to believe, appeared not less questionable than his conclusions: yet, reasoning from these premises, he inferred with much confidence the high probability of events which have since actually occurred in St. Domingo, extraordinary and wonderful though those events have appeared to the European public ‡. The harsh and unparalleled nature of West India bondage in general, and those distinguishing features of that state which were delineated in the Crisis, were the very corner stones, and

* Crisis, Letter 2d.

† Ib. p. 7 to 15.

‡ Ib. p. 56 to 76.

foundation

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foundation walls, upon the solidity of which the whole structure of the argument depended.

From the terrible peculiarities of that state, and from these alone, it was inferred, that the negroes of St. Domingo would never submit to it again*; for it was admitted, that to any yoke known elsewhere by the name of slavery, the gigantic power, the relentless vengeance, the craft, and violence of the French government, might probably be able to enforce submission. Political, and even personal freedom had been completely overthrown in many parts of Europe; and there was nothing in the air of the Antilles to make the spirit of liberty there more vigorous, or less tameable by the terror of the sword; but it was predicted that negro freedom would be found invincible in St. Domingo, because the horrors of the state opposed to it were experimentally known to its defenders: and because they were of that intolerable kind which the author endeavoured to describe †. He foresaw the true though strange issue of the unequal contest between the colossal republic of France, and the negroes of a West India island, only because he clearly understood the nature of the practical question in dispute.

The great local and personal advantages,

* Crisis, p. 55-6.

† Ib. p. 46 to 56, 75-6, &c

which

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which favoured the cause of freedom in that climate, were not overlooked or concealed—on the contrary, they were fully explained and relied upon* as necessary means; but the vital and indomitable principle, which could alone give life and efficacy to those means of resistance, was an aversion to the former yoke not to be overcome; an antipathy more powerful, than all the terrors that despotism could oppose to it, more stimulating than any passion or appetite that could plead for submission, and more obstinate than the love of life itself.

Upon these premises and these calculations, it was foretold early in March, 1802, that the issue of the French expedition would be such as, to the astonishment of Europe, it has ultimately proved—disappointment to the views of the consul, and a triumph to his sable opponents.

In the progress and incidents, as well as the final event of that extraordinary contest, the “Crisis of the Sugar Colonies” has proved for the most part a history by anticipation of the war of St. Domingo.

That the arms of France would probably have a short-lived apparent success was foreseen †; nor

* Crisis, p. 58 to 69.

† Ib. p. 44-5.

were

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were the artifices and frauds, which concurred with force in the attainment of that ephemeral triumph, unexpected *; but it was also foreseen that the discovery of the true object of the war would produce a new and decisive resistance †.

The facility, so clearly manifested, of obtaining a loyal submission to the republic without the restitution of the former slavery ‡; the speedy resort to a compromise on that basis, such as was actually, though perfidiously, made by Leclerc, after force had been tried in vain §; the division of the negro chiefs and troops, by a crafty concealment of the design against freedom in the outset, and the consequent defection of many of them from Toussaint ||; their faithful adherence, nevertheless, to the cause of general freedom, when the mask was dropped by the invaders ¶; these, and other leading incidents of the contest, were all foretold in the Crisis, with more or less confidence and clearness, in proportion as they were more or less necessary results of the general premises from which they were all inferred.

To point out at large the agreement of these

* Crisis, p. 45.

† Ib. p. 45-6.

‡ Ib. p. 45:

§ Ib. p. 85:

|| Ib. p. 45.

¶ Ib. p. 45-6. 56-7, 8.

conjectural

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conjectural conclusions with subsequent events, would be to exceed those limits, which regard to your time, Sir, and my own, must prescribe to this address. The task will be more easy when a tolerably fair and intelligent account of the late war in St. Domingo shall meet the public eye; but in spite of the unprecedented falshood of the consular press, no Englishman is so ill informed of the events of that horrible war, as not to perceive, should he now turn over the pages of the Crisis, that the opinions there disclosed have been fully verified, and the author's expectations very strikingly confirmed.

To the purpose for which this brief review is offered, the confirmation of the premises of fact contained in that pamphlet, some events unforeseen by the author, are no less important than those which his conjectures embraced.

That a compromise would be the result of the obstinate resistance which the French generals would encounter, and of their despair of final success, he foresaw to be probable*; but that perfidy so unexampled in the history of this bad world, as was practised by the French commanders, would be employed to frustrate the compact, was as much beyond his foresight as that of the illustrious victim of the crime, the generous and immortal Toussaint. Ignorant of the yet

* Crisis, p. 85.

unfathomed

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unfathomed depth of French depravity, and supposing that the consul had more political wisdom than he has lately exhibited, the author did not foresee the probability of a measure, at once the basest and the weakest that ever dishonoured a nation. The second jeopardy, therefore, to the cause of African freedom, which resulted from this perfidy, put the strength of the defensive principle and means, upon which the author relied, to a proof unexpectedly severe : yet such were the truth and the force of those premises upon which his reasoning was built, so invincible were the feelings which withstood the restitution of slavery, and such the natural means of resistance, that the betrayed and disheartened colonists, though perfidiously deprived of their leaders, of their military champions, and of their arms, again made head against the armies of the republic, and again triumphed over their powerful and ferocious oppressors.

The desperate perseverance with which the war was afterwards prosecuted by the consul, the terrible means which he employed, and the remorseless devotion of the monsters Leclerc and Rochambeau, and their troops, to their master's horrible behests, were also far beyond the author's calculations ; but the principles upon which he relied have passed unhurt through all these extreme ordeals, and their justice has by every trial been more clearly established.

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The last and strongest confirmation has been given by the consul himself. He, who acted upon notions diametrically opposite to the opinions maintained in the Crisis, and who expected so little difficulty in the execution of his projects, that he sent not only his brother, and brother-in-law, but his sister, with her infant child, to grace and enjoy his expected easy triumph over African freedom, saw at length his error so clearly, that in despair of re-establishing slavery, he resolved on extermination; and instead of still aiming to reclaim a flourishing colony, fought, massacred, and murdered for a desert.

Without detaining you longer with a review, to the seeming egotism of which I could be reconciled only by its undeniable public importance, I demand in general new credence to the facts, and some increased regard to the conclusions contained in my former address; to some of which I shall have occasion to revert in the course of the ensuing discussions. In particular, I hope that one great truth, which was matter of argumentative induction in the Crisis, the invincibility of freedom in St. Domingo, may now be fairly assumed, as a proved and incontestible truth.

The new and interesting question which I propose now to discuss, is “*what line of conduct a British minister ought, at the present juncture, to adopt towards the people of St. Domingo?*”

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Upon

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Upon this important question, but one practical notion, and that of a very indefinite kind, seems as yet to have entered into the conception of the public. That every degree of amity towards this new society, consistent with a due regard to our own colonial interests, ought to be observed, seems to be a unanimous sentiment. It seems also to be in general thought, that some commercial intercourse ought to be formed with them, so as to secure to ourselves whatever trade their industry may immediately furnish. But these opinions, as far as they have met the public eye, are qualified by so many cautious and ambiguous terms, that their authors may be affirmed to have yet formed no decisive practical judgment.

For my part, having a distinct and firm opinion on this interesting subject, an opinion, which, however erroneous it may be, is simple, practical, and, in my own poor judgment, highly important to my country, I feel myself bound to declare it ; and shall do so without management or reserve.

YOU OUGHT, SIR, I CONCEIVE TO ACKNOWLEDGE WITHOUT DELAY, THE LIBERTY OF THE NEGROES OF ST. DOMINGO ; AND TO ENTER INTO FŒDERAL ENGAGEMENTS WITH THEM AS A SOVEREIGN AND INDEPENDENT PEOPLE ; AND YOU OUGHT FURTHER, NOT ONLY TO GRANT, BUT, IF NECESSARY, TO VOLUNTEER, A GUARANTEE OF THEIR INDEPENDENCY AGAINST THE REPUBLIC OF FRANCE.

Should this proposition startle at first by its apparent