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George D. Flinter

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An Account of the Present State of the Island of Puerto Rico

George Dawson Flinter (d. 1838) served in the British army, before working for the Spanish crown. In both capacities he spend time in the West Indies, and was well placed to write about the region, and compare the different colonies. He published a report on slavery in Puerto Rico in Spanish in 1832, and this more wide-ranging report on the island in English in 1834. Addressed to the King of Spain, the work shows considerable bias in his flattering interpretation of Spanish policies towards Puerto Rico, and he downplays the degree to which the colony was involved in the slave trade. His description of the island and its natural resources makes it seem like a paradise, as Spain was trying to encourage further settlement. But he provides a good picture of the way of life of the different social and racial groups of inhabitants, and much detail about trade.

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AN ACCOUNT
OF THE
PRESENT STATE OF THE ISLAND
OF
PUERTO RICO.

COMPRISING

NUMEROUS ORIGINAL FACTS AND DOCUMENTS ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE STATE OF
COMMERCE AND AGRICULTURE, AND OF THE CONDITION, MORAL AND PHY-
SICAL, OF THE VARIOUS CLASSES OF THE POPULATION IN THAT ISLAND, AS
COMPARED WITH THE COLONIES OF OTHER EUROPEAN POWERS; DEMON-
STRATING THE SUPERIORITY OF THE SPANISH SLAVE CODE,—THE GREAT
ADVANTAGES OF FREE OVER SLAVE LABOUR, &C.

BY

COLONEL FLINTER,

OF THE GENERAL STAFF OF THE ARMY OF HER MOST CATHOLIC MAJESTY, AND KNIGHT
COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL ORDER OF ISABEL THE CATHOLIC.

LONDON :

LONGMAN, REES, ORME, BROWN, GREEN, AND LONGMAN,

PATERNOSTER ROW.

1834.

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THE FOLLOWING PAGES

ARE DEDICATED TO

HIS EXCELLENCY THE MARQUIS DE ZAMBRANO

KNIGHT GRAND CROSS OF THE ROYAL AND DISTINGUISHED ORDER OF

CHARLES THE THIRD, LIEUTENANT-GENERAL OF THE ARMIES OF

HER MOST CATHOLIC MAJESTY, &c., &c., &c.,

AS A PROOF OF THE RESPECT, REGARD, AND AFFECTION OF

HIS EXCELLENCY'S FRIEND,

AND VERY HUMBLE SERVANT,

GEORGE D. FLINTER.

Madrid, 1833.

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P R E F A C E.



IN this brief preface I can only cursorily advert to the main objects proposed in the publication of the present volume. To make known the great and growing importance of the colonies that remain to Spain in the western hemisphere, and especially of the valuable and fertile island of Puerto Rico; to suggest further improvements in the management of those colonies; and to recommend to the government of Her Most Catholic Majesty the speedy recognition of the independence of the South American republics—these are among the chief objects of the book. Besides these, to exhibit the paternal character of the colonial government of Spain,—to point out the beneficent operation of the Spanish slave code, not only in protecting the bondman from oppression, but in preparing and fitting him for final emancipation,—and to demonstrate, by unanswerable facts, the mighty advantages of free over slave labour, in security, in economy, in productiveness, are objects which I have specially had in view. To the last-mentioned point I earnestly and particularly solicit the reader's attention, at the present critical conjuncture in the history of the West India colonies.

Uninfluenced by the spirit of party, unbiassed by national prejudices, unfettered by sectarian principles, I feel it a duty I owe to humanity, to lay before the public my observations on the condition of the free

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coloured and slave population in the West India colonies of Spain, the result of twenty-one years' experience in that quarter of the world. I appeal not to the passions. I scorn to stoop to the meanness of adulation, or to employ the baseness of deceit. I submit without presumption, with the candour of a soldier, to the reflecting men of all nations, of every religious sect, and of every political creed, the facts I have gathered, and the sources from whence I have derived my information.

It is now twenty-one years since I first landed in the West Indies, a commissioned officer in the regular forces of His Britannic Majesty. At different periods I have been either stationed in the garrisons of the several British islands, and those of other powers conquered by the British arms, or have visited them in a private capacity. I have moreover personally visited the colonies and establishments of all the European nations on the American continent and in the West Indies, as well as the republic of the United States. Both on the continent of America and in the islands, I have myself possessed landed property and slaves. I have been for several years doing duty on the staff of the Spanish army which garrisons the colonies of Her Most Catholic Majesty. My leisure hours have been dedicated to the acquisition of every information that could throw light on the colonial policy of Spain. I have attentively observed the condition, moral and physical, of the white, the free coloured, and the slave population in her West India islands; and from my situation and connexions, I have had access to every source from which correct information could be obtained. I therefore indulge a hope, that the facts which I offer with respect to the colonial administration of Spain, may not be considered unworthy of the notice of those en-

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lightened men who require practical truths to direct their judgment.

If I have taken a retrospective view of the laws and regulations which have long existed in the Spanish transatlantic dominions in favour of the captive African, and compared them with the laws and regulations which till very lately have been in force in the colonies both of France and England, let it not be supposed that I have made this comparison for the purpose of vilifying the latter: my only object is to convey some idea of the wise preparatory measures which have been gradually fitting the slaves for emancipation under the dominion of Spain, at a period when no legislative provisions were enacted, either for their physical comforts, or for their moral improvement, in the colonies of any other European nation. It must be peculiarly gratifying to those who advocate the emancipation of the slaves on sound and salutary principles, to discover by the facts which I present for their consideration, that free labour on a large scale, and attended by the most beneficial consequences, has been for some years in practical operation in the island of Puerto Rico, and that the free black and the slave work together in the same field with the white man. It will also be ascertained by a reference to my observations, that every species of tropical productions may be cultivated by free labour. It is my delight to indulge in prospective views of liberty and happiness for the unfortunate slaves; and I fondly anticipate that much good may ultimately be effected by their progressive emancipation.

Were I permitted to offer my opinion with respect to the policy necessary to be adopted in the Spanish colonies

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at this critical moment, I would unhesitatingly declare that their safety will depend on the energy, the prudence, and the impartial justice of the colonial administration, as well as on the discipline of the troops, and the honourable zeal and fidelity of the officers. One of the first steps of the government should be to drive from the ports of Cuba back to the coast of Africa, every slave ship with its cargo that might be captured by the cruisers of France or England; for the accumulating numbers of these uneducated negroes, let loose on the island among the free blacks and slaves, already too numerous, is introducing a mass of contagion which may produce most calamitous consequences. I am also decidedly convinced that the Spanish government should take the most prompt and energetic measures to prevent the further importation of African slaves into Cuba. Apart from all considerations of morality or humanity, the advantages (if any) arising from this nefarious traffic, can only be temporary, while the evils are enormous, perilous, and permanent. The security of the lives and properties of the white inhabitants depends on the total cessation of the slave trade; for every black or coloured man who lands on their shore is, and must necessarily be, their irreconcilable enemy, as long as that trade continues to exist. The white population of Cuba and Puerto Rico at this moment have every thing at stake. It is of paramount importance that they make common cause with the mother country — that they cling to her as their sheet-anchor in every vicissitude of fortune, and in every political change still look up to her for support; for on this union depends the salvation of every thing that is dear to them on earth.

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