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978-1-108-02459-4 - Present State of the Spanish Colonies, Volume 1

William Walton

Excerpt

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PRESENT STATE
OF THE
SPANISH COLONIES.

INTRODUCTION.

HISPAÑOLA.

TO give a full and perfect account of so extensive and varied an island as Hispañola, might absorb a life devoted to the study of geography, topography, botany, and mineralogy; of themselves distinct and important sciences, in which the narrator would require to be equally profound as in those of history and political economy. Educated in the active school of trade, and unprepared by the acquisition of those various branches of knowledge that qualify the general historian, little more than description can be expected from me; elaborate and abstruse disquisitions I

VOL. I.

B

2

cannot enter into, nor attempt any excursions of philosophical reasoning; which indeed often mislead; for, being founded generally on speculative and partial systems, they do not accord with those simple principles of truth and fact, which ought to be the sole object and ornament of history. Such however have too often been the productions of the French literati; mixed compositions of history and philosophy, a flowery system of things, developed to give room for the delusions of sophistry; narratives of travels dressed up by persons who never left their native country, and grounded on the hearsay of others, who but too often see things reflected from the mirror of prejudice.

The intent of the following sheets is to give an insight into countries little known amongst us, to assist in placing them in the interesting point of view they deserve, and to rescue them from that neglect in which they have hitherto remained. They become doubly interesting in the present advancing crisis, as they open resources to enterprize, and an exchange of produce founded on commercial relations, and protected by our own government. My desire is to tread in paths that have hitherto been to Englishmen nearly inaccessible; to add my

3

mite as well to the annals of geography, as to the information of the literary and commercial world, and to contribute to the establishment of a correct acquaintance with an interesting race of men, so long kept beyond our reach from want of convenient intercourse. In the prosecution of my attempt, exactitude shall be my course, and truth my land-mark.

Placed from my early youth amongst the people of Spain, with whose peculiarities of character I was pleased, with whose manners I easily assimilated and became familiar, and whose elegant language it was my delight to cultivate, I formed there the ground-work of my research; I discerned in them dormant resources which were stifled by their system of government and internal policy; I beheld a nation labouring under the thralldom of ignorance and depression, and bridled by the iron curb of mental and political terror; yet I saw the diamond sparkling in the surrounding incrustation, that wanted but the torch of reason to distinguish it, and a suitable process of improvement to bring forth its genuine lustre.

If it be true that instruction alone fits man for a state of society, and unites him by the bond of mutual happiness and self-preservation; that it alone calls forth the latent ener-

4

gies and virtues of the soul ;—rend but asunder the veil of night, that has so long overclouded Spain, and its inhabitants are capable of all things. Hitherto existing but as the vassals of the great, and accustomed to pay to their decrees, and those of the government they composed, the same implicit deference as to the infallible precepts of their pastors ; they were impressed with the idea, that to reason was a privilege they had not a right to arrogate ; yet like the genial soil on which they toiled, their minds wanted not the hand of the tiller, but merely the planting of those seeds from which were to spring the principles of true and active patriotism ; they were not sensible of wrongs the extent of which they did not comprehend ; and accustomed as they were to endure slavery, it did not appear to them an evil to destroy which deserved the sacrifice of their blood. It is with the Spaniard as with the unlettered Indian ; point out to him the summit of happiness to which he is to ascend, make him sensible of the enjoyment that there awaits him ; rouse him by example, and guide him by the hand of union ; intervening obstacles will then increase his ardour and his heart and arm will obey the impulse of conviction.

It would be almost intruding on the patience

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[More information](#)

5

of the British reader, to enter on long and general remarks respecting their distant possessions, though yet so little known among us, were it not for that interest which every bosom feels for the welfare of all belonging to this injured people; and at a moment when such national sympathy pervades every class, even outlines cannot be altogether unacceptable. If that alliance which at present subsists between this country and Spain, be the emanation of a congenial spirit, as well as the tie of interest, it becomes of equal import to attend to this vital extremity of their political body; and its distance ought not to suffer us to behold it through the wrong end of the perspective. Our experience of the composition of character which marked the heterogeneous mass of the persons of political influence in Spain, and which even under the immediate eye of government has shewn us the obstacles which have operated against its independence in Europe, may give us an idea of those which exist in its colonies abroad; what then ought not to be dreaded, in a distant clime, where the relations of interest and nationality are nearly severed, where the sway of authority is only reflective, and where through the feebleness of delegated power the people are left to them-

6

selves, and exposed to the machinations of their artful enemy.

In my humble attempt therefore I am not devoid of hope, that its result may be of some general benefit; time, however, has not enabled me to give much classification or arrangement to my detached remarks, but they will be found to contain at least the outlines of the present state of the country, and a sketch, not of what it once was, but of what by proper management it soon might be.—My ambition is to please and to be useful; I dare not aspire at more.

Intending in my outset to convey an idea of the Spanish part of Hispanola, the island which has most, and more recently come within my immediate notice, and of which we have nothing novel or correct in print, I shall forbear to ransack early writers, for the purpose of presenting their ideas in a new dress; and as my remarks are derived from actual observation, or good authority of a recent date, I submit them to an indulgent public with the greater confidence.

Unlike Raynal, and many more, I ground myself not on the general reports of others, nor do I attempt to pourtray scenes that have only existed in fancy. Confining myself within

the pale of descriptive truth, I leave philosophic deductions to the visionary and the speculative, and without attempting to conjure up events from the shades of futurity, if I point at momentous changes which are now impending, it is that they may be counteracted, and turned into the proper stream of advantage, and that the general concussion which has agitated the bosom of Spain may not fatally extend to her Transatlantic settlements.

My views are to benefit the merchant who has not had the opportunities of going abroad, by enabling him, from his own cabinet, to direct his commercial plans, in countries he yet imperfectly knows; and to hinder so many inconsistent adventures in which, from want of knowledge he fails, involving in his own distress that of the community at large. My endeavour is to promote the increase of trade within its proper channels; to point out new resources which may add to the prosperity of the nation, and frustrate the designs of the common enemy against the commercial prosperity of England; and to demonstrate the means of improving those advantages which are consistent with her national honour, and which come within her reach.

In contending as she has done with a go-

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[More information](#)

8

vernment that admits of no law but convenience and caprice, it is but just to increase her scale of commerce in every possible way, and it is right to be prepared to avail herself of those occasions which the injustice of the enemy may afford to her naval power, or to her manufacturing and commercial enterprize, and thus to secure her own just retribution.

The world at present no longer exhibits the portrait of a common state ; every selfish effort is now made for individual preservation, which, with England, in great measure depends on her being enabled to waft her own merchandize unrivalled to every distant quarter of the globe. Political society is now convulsed, much as is a city shaken by an earthquake ; and nations, like individuals, must seek to ensure their safety by their own exertions. The system of 'no intercourse without sovereignty,' is at an end ; the increase of trade is an addition to power, and it is better purchased by wise regulations than by armies and fleets.

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9

CHAP. I.

FIRST DISCOVERY, AND EARLY HISTORY OF
HISPAÑOLA.

IT was in the year 1492 that Columbus first undertook his projected discovery of a Western Hemisphere, and in his passage observed the variation of the compass. He noted, at a distance of 200 leagues from the isle of Ferro, that the needle did not point as usual to the N. but declined to the N. W. and found this phenomenon increased as he proceeded W. A scale of reasoning, founded on cosmography, astronomy, and the theory of the antipodes, was the basis of his scheme. Other regions he conceived must exist in the West, to maintain the equilibrium of the globe, and the theories of several of the ancients led to the solution of this problem. To sagacity then we owe the original conception of his project, which his love of glory, and his zeal for the good of science, urged him to carry into effect. The difficulties he encountered, the obstacles he overcame, and the dangers he braved, in the execution of his plans, have already been so

10

frequently delineated, that to say more, were mere repetition; yet the impartial and enlightened will ever weep over the fate of this great man, and feel sensations of disgustful horror, on reflecting that both contemporaries and posterity have tried to rob him of the merit and glory of his enterprize; but whilst envy and intrigue supplanted him in the favour and gratitude of his king, and even authors rose to contest the originality of his plans, of the execution of which they could not deprive him, it is a consolation to feel, that they have only raised monuments to his fame, which will exist beyond the bounds of time, and have woven for him a brighter crown by enhancing that merit they tried to eclipse, and embalming those laurels they attempted to wither.

In speaking of this great occurrence, a late valuable Spanish author has observed, that another enterprise yet remained to the world worthy of a genius of the first class, and of intrepid courage. From the notions that were entertained of the Eastern coasts of Asia, it was supposed that they were at an immense distance from the coasts and known islands of Europe and Africa. That such an extensive space might contain large countries filled with mighty nations and