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William Wilberforce

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CORRESPONDENCE

OF

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE, ESQ.

W. WILBERFORCE, ESQ. TO RT. HON. WM. PITT.

Lyme, January 1, 1805.

My dear Pitt,

I heard lately from Samuel Thornton of his having an interview with you concerning the collectorship at Hull; and I have ever since been rather uneasy, lest, from not exactly taking, or quite accurately representing my meaning, in that part of the transaction in which *you* come into question, he may have exhibited to you (unintentionally of course) a false notion of my sentiments and feelings. I will not make speeches; but I can truly assure you, that so far as you are personally concerned, there is scarcely any man living of whom I would more freely ask, or could more satisfactorily receive any favour; but being connected with a county which used to be estimated by Sir George Savile at about one eighth or one ninth of all England, unless I had laid down to myself the rule of declining to ask favours for my constituents, there never would have been a week in which I should not have had to

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pester you with some solicitation or other; and I am sure your own feelings will instruct you that this would have been a situation equally destructive of all political independence, or (what I value highly in your case) all personal comfort, and the continuance of that friendly connection, which (though I have never, I believe, said so civil a thing to you before) I esteem as a source of high honour to myself, and of great satisfaction. Even with my rule, I have at one time or other been asked for favours by most of my chief Yorkshire friends, but they have always most honourably acquiesced with good humour in my declining to oblige them. But the case would have been wholly different, if I had not had this rule to plead . . . Of course, all this time I except all those situations which, from their connection with the county or place he represents, every M. P. is naturally consulted about filling, from his supposed knowledge of the characters, &c. of the people of the place . . . I really have been uncomfortable ever since I heard of that interview with you, from the fear lest this had not been distinctly stated; and you will, therefore, excuse my taking up so much of your time as the explanation has required.

The distance of this place from London is such, that I cannot well (as I travel with all my family) get up in time for the House on Tuesday, if I set off on Monday. And as I don't like to stay a Sunday on the road, and never travel on Sunday, except in a case of *great* and unavoidable necessity, I should be forced to leave this place in the middle of next week, unless you could dispense with my attendance on the first day. In

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general, there is no question then, and of late there has been little conversation either, so that I think if I were up on Wednesday (the 16th) or Thursday, it would do very well. I write to you, because I know you won't summon me up on the day (Tuesday) without necessity; if it be really desirable that I should come, I certainly will (if it please God), but I have reasons connected with health and family convenience, for rather desiring to remain here as long as I can, and hope not to travel during this very severe weather: of course I myself should wish to be up, if a very full attendance were required; and I only ask you, because of that you can best judge. Remember there is nobody here to copy after my example. I have often heard of you, and was in hopes, from the papers, you were taking a little Bath water before the meeting. I trust Lord Harrowby goes on well. I am much interested for him.

Believe me sincerely yours,

W. WILBERFORCE.

P.S. One single line or even word (stay or come*) will do.

REV. SAMUEL MARSDEN TO W. WILBERFORCE, ESQ.

New South Wales, Parramatta, January 2, 1805.

Honoured Sir,

As Mr. Robert Campbell, who has been a resident merchant in N. S. Wales many years, is returning

* Vide Mr. Pitt's answer, *Life of Wilberforce*, vol. iii. p. 208.

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to Europe, I embrace the opportunity to give you a line by him.

His object in returning to England is to arrange some commercial affairs, and then return.

I do not know that it will be in your power to forward his wishes; if it should, I shall feel myself particularly obliged for any attention you may pay to him. Mr. Campbell has been a real friend to this colony, and I cannot say too much in his behalf. He returns to England in a ship called the *Lady Barlow*, with a cargo of oil and skins. This is the first cargo procured by the inhabitants of N. S. Wales, and is the beginning of the commerce of a new world. On that account I hope it will meet with countenance and support from Government.

As we now abound with the necessaries of life, some article of commerce must be suggested by Government in order to find employment for the people. We have wheat sufficient for more than two years now in the colony, and have no market for it. Perhaps the fishery is the only object that at present offers employment for the labouring people. The settlers begin to feel the want of a market for their surplus grain very much; and will be greatly distressed for every thing excepting bread and meat, unless commerce can be made to supply their wants. This is a consideration of great importance for the future welfare of this colony. But on this subject I refer you to Mr. Campbell.

I am happy to inform you that there has, for some time past, been more attention paid to the Sabbath than at any former period. I attribute this to your kind

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interference with his Majesty's ministers. I am so perfectly acquainted with the disposition of those in high situations here, that I am sure no reformation in this respect would originate from them. I need not tell you how much I want an assistant. The colony becomes more extensive daily. My duty is very hard. It is more than four years now since Mr. Johnson returned, and no clergyman sent out. I have still to lament the want of a church at head-quarters: one is begun, but when it will be finished I know not. The Orphan Institution goes on well. We have lately made accommodation for about fifty girls more than the school would contain at first. I am persuaded it will be attended with the greatest benefit to this settlement, and rescue a great number of unprotected females from ruin. A school of Industry and Education for boys is very much wanted; numbers are living in idleness and vice, who might be employed in some honest trade, if a public building was erected for their reception. I hope to see this done at some future period.

I am persuaded, if there was no clergyman here, this colony would be a much greater scene of sin and iniquity than it is. A minister of religion, particularly in N. S. Wales, where he is known by every person in the settlement, and personally knows almost every person, stands as a barrier against the overflowings of sin and ungodliness. Though I cannot say much apparent good is done by my public ministry, yet I know much real evil is prevented. The power that changes the heart belongs to God. It is a great consolation to me, amidst all my difficulties, to know and feel that I am

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in the very place where Divine Wisdom would have me be. That the Divine blessing may rest upon you and yours is the sincere prayer of,

Honoured Sir,
Your most obedient humble Servant,
SAMUEL MARSDEN.

WM. WILBERFORCE, ESQ. TO M. B.

London, February 1, 1805.

My dear Friend,

Poor ——'s letter is really dark and black beyond all degrees of darkness; if there were not certain chinks through which the light breaks in, and shows that the sombre hue is not so much the natural complexion of the incidents she relates, as that which arises from the temper of the relater. When we are becoming the prey of these minor troubles, it is a good plan to look from home (so to express it), and to fix our eyes on those who are suffering the real solid evils of life. A poor woman is just gone from me, whose husband and child, about four years ago, were forced by *starving* into St. Giles's Workhouse. There they both died of fever, and the woman herself caught the disease. The physician from whom I heard the melancholy tale, being told there was somebody ill in the house, tried to get in by knocking, but no one coming to the door, he forced his way in, and found this poor woman delirious, and three or four children about her. Last night I saw

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her again for the first time since that dreadful season. She had fallen into debt for rent, the parish having almost taken away the allowance for her three children, and was in imminent danger of having all her goods seized. On inquiring how she maintained herself, I found it was by going out every night about eleven, and selling saloop till morning to hackney-coachmen, and others who keep unreasonable hours. Yet really this poor woman was not plaintive.

I did not mean to tell you so long a story, but it forced itself on my pen. Remember, my dear friend, concerning all those petty difficulties which may molest you, that ten years hence it will signify very little how the points may have been determined, one way or the other; and never harass yourself more than enough on any principle of economy, but remember, that to spend seven shillings' worth of health and spirits, in order to save four shillings' worth of silver, is a most extravagant proceeding. Above all, learn to cast your care on God, who careth for you; in every thing by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, letting your requests be made known unto Him. Our blessed Lord know our infirmities, for He has felt them, and therefore He is the more disposed to bear with them, or rather we may be the more assured of His thus graciously sympathising with us. * * *

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WM. COOKSON, ESQ. TO WM. WILBERFORCE, ESQ.

[Docketed — “ Merchants’ sentiments and feelings on Woollen
Manufacture.”]

Leeds, February 5, 1805.

Dear Sir,

I suppose you now settled in London quarters, and your time at the disposal of every claimant except yourself. Our clothiers* will, perhaps, be at you again, as I hear they are in motion, and a printed address was handed round the Cloth Halls a few days ago, instigating them to move again, and suggesting the old train of arguments. I had secured one for you, but I have mislaid it: however, it contains no new argument or matter whatever, and I really hope they will desist from any further pursuit of their impracticable objects for want of funds.

The domestic system, as they call it, sounds well enough, but that is all: every part except the weaving is performed at public mills; and if the legislature could be prevailed upon to say that cloth weavers shall not work together beyond a given number, the owners of factories can so readily divide their shops into dwelling-houses around them, containing each the limited number of looms, under the management of one person and his family as subworkmen, that no end proposed by the clothiers could accrue. But whilst in every other county, and in every branch of manufacture, a master may employ as many weavers as he can find work for, and

* Vide *Life of Wilberforce*, vol. iii. p. 264.

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to prevent speculation, and ensure precise observance of time and order, can congregate his weavers as his judgment recommends, it is not very likely that any restrictions and fetters should be imposed on the Yorkshire clothier only. The lower class of clothiers require that no man who has capital, enterprise, and ability, sources from which all our improvements and superiority in British manufactures arise, shall be allowed to exercise them in Yorkshire, unless he has been apprentice for seven years, or is a clothier's son. The domestic system is held up in a very imposing light; but if in a true one in respect of morality, would that be a reason for shackling Yorkshire men and Yorkshire property only? If the capitalists really have an advantage, how would morality be promoted by merely expelling them into other counties? But, believe me, the domestic system has no effectual weight in this matter: the number of master clothiers has increased in full proportion with the factories; and were I called upon to give my opinion on oath, I should say, that in respect of one third or more of the master clothiers, the interests of morality and the comfort of their families would be infinitely better promoted by their being employed under some opulent owner of a factory than as they now are. The lower order of clothiers buy every thing at the dearest: they are taken from home twice a week to attend markets,—frequently attend two and six days without selling at all, and far too commonly spend too much of their time and money in public-houses. The number who return home intoxicated every market day is very considerable, and chiefly among the lower class of masters;

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their anxiety to sell, and their inexperience, exposes this class continually to the plausible depredations of swindling buyers, and their necessities (to find the means of paying their wages, and for their purchases) expose great numbers every year to the fangs of the law. Then their families are ruined. But if they can be *set on* by some opulent manufacturer, the comfortable state of that family on the comparison has greatly gained. The father, mother, and each child above nine years of age, can have regular work for six days in the week: their real earnings far exceed those of the former state, are regularly paid on the Saturday night, and the alehouse only is the loser. When each master had his wool scribed, carded, and spun at home, the domestic system had a meaning: now even the weaving is very much hired out. With respect to the gig mill, which in fact bears no sort of affinity to what was so called in old times, the operation is just as much superior to hand raising, as the machine frame to the old spinning-wheel. To equal it by hand work our dressers find impossible: the competition to come any way near it occasions them so much care, that they boldly lay down a law that "*we shall not use a gig,*" and apply to Parliament to give their mandate a legal sanction.

As these old obsolete acts are now to be the subject of inquiry and revision, we have another grievance of antique date to remove. Wire cards, as made one hundred years ago, might injure the texture of the cloth in the dressing. Now cards are made so fine, so flexible, the fibres operating on the surface of the cloth so much more close and numerous, as to render