

**THE REAL BEARINGS OF THE WEST
INDIA QUESTION, AS
EXPOUNDED BY THE MOST
INTELLIGENT AND INDEPENDENT
FREE-TRADER OF THE DAY**

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The Real Bearings of the West India Question, as Expounded by the Most Intelligent and independent free-trader of the day by Matthew James Higgins

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MATTHEW JAMES HIGGINS

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THE REAL BEARINGS
OF THE
WEST INDIA QUESTION,

AS EXPOUNDED BY THE MOST INTELLIGENT AND
INDEPENDENT FREE-TRADER OF THE DAY;

EDITED BY JACOB OMNIUM,

AND

DEDICATED TO THE

RIGHT HON. LORD JOHN RUSSELL,

&c. &c. &c.

"Let the principle be comprehended, and the mind of the people will insist upon morality and honour; they will dash at once, from their lips the chalice you offer them, tinged as it is with the blood of fellow creatures sacrificed to economy."—*Bishop of Oxford's Speech, Feb. 7, 1848.*

THIRD EDITION.

LONDON:
JAMES RIDGWAY, PICCADILLY.

1848.

TO THE
RT. HON. LORD JOHN RUSSELL,
ETC. ETC.

MY LORD,

I TAKE the liberty of dedicating to you this reprint of a series of admirable articles on the West Indian Question, which have appeared in the columns of the *Times* during the last few months.

They present such an able and at the same time impartial summary of the past and present conduct of the British Legislature towards her unfortunate sugar colonies, that I feel confident their republication in this convenient form will be acceptable to all honest men, whatever their politics may be, who take an interest in this important national question—either from motives of philanthropy, honour, or gain.

The barefaced manner in which, during the late Sugar debates (after the leading Ministers of the Crown had voluntarily pledged themselves to deal with the question before them with the utmost “candour” and “fairness”) the truth was suppressed—important documents withheld—and facts either actually invented (as in the instance of Beet-root sugar) or distorted and unscrupulously adapted to argument, not only by individuals from whom such a

course might have been reasonably expected, but by men in high places, from whom all parties had a right to hope for better things, induces me to take this opportunity of entreating your Lordship, for the credit as well as for the interest of the party over which you preside, to deal more fairly and manfully with us in future; such Cobdenesque conduct as that pursued towards us during the debates in February last, must ultimately prove as fatal to the character of the Statesmen who condescend to have recourse to it, as it has been to the fortunes of the distressed commercial body whom they are seeking to sacrifice as a propitiatory offering to their unmanageable and dishonest allies, the freebooters of the Manchester school.

I have the honour to be,

My Lord,

Your obedient Servant,

JACOB OMNIUM.

I.

TIMES, Dec. 11, 1847.

It is fortunate that the two subjects of our West Indian interests and our system of suppressing the slave trade are so inseparably connected that they must needs be both discussed at once, so that the most powerful suggestions both of economy and humanity are at work together for the benefit of each. Sugar and slaves are so far identical in the ideas which the words involve, that the cultivation of the cane must necessarily be taken to imply the employment of negro labour under some condition or other. This country has put forth a reasonable demand for cheap sugar—that is for the supply of one of its first necessaries at a price which shall not be augmented by any artificial contrivance. But the countries in which this valuable produce is raised have always yet been, and are likely still to be, subject to such conditions that native labour cannot be found in sufficient abundance, and the superfluous population of some other countries is as indispensable an importation to them as their produce is to us. This labour has hitherto been stolen, not purchased; it has been procured by a system as monstrous as if we were annually to fit out a marauding expedition for ravaging the coast of Georgia, and carrying off by violence all the cotton we wanted.

for our manufactures,—the incidents and consequences being of course infinitely more abominable in the case of a traffic so essentially infamous. Against this traffic we have most laudably and conscientiously striven ; we have summarily interdicted any imports of the stolen labour into our own possessions, and we are most laboriously though blindly struggling to intercept them on their route to the possessions of others. But here we have stopped short. We never considered how our planters were to be restored to the paths of virtue after having been somewhat rudely diverted from those of vice ; we never thought whether the miserable population, whose labour was stolen, might not be left as badly off as before ; we never troubled ourselves to scrutinize the wisdom of our efforts to bring others to the same ways with ourselves, or to realize the consequences of our success if it should haply have awaited us. *Avisé la fin*, said a wise man. Has it ever entered into the heads of our agitators to consider what would have been the result if some supernatural efficacy had been lent to our coast blockade, and we had actually annihilated every house of export between Cape Coast and Angola ? If, without substituting any system for the abominations we demolished, we had thoroughly succeeded in reducing all other plantations to the condition of our own, will any reader be pleased to inform us where we should have looked for any sugar *at all* ?

Do we assert, then, that a certain portion of the

human race are fatally destined to slave for another portion? Nothing of the sort. What we say is, that under the peculiar conditions of the West India Islands and the African Continent, the former supply the most natural and beneficial receptacle for the superabundant population of the latter. The African negro, though he is indeed represented in poetry as "torn from home and all its pleasures," has never known in one case of ten thousand, the security or happiness of a single hour. Beyond the narrow strip of European possessions is a hideous waste, where the beasts of the field are more temperate and sensible than the tribes of the country. With few of the necessaries even of their own barbarous life, a thick and swarming multitude of savages prey upon each other with a fury which has almost fortunately been diverted from the gratifications of indiscriminate massacre to the calculations of lucrative kidnapping. A chief had better almost go and seek captives for sale than murder them for exercise. A market for this dense and destructive population, where they could be alike well treated and well taught, is the highest conceivable blessing of which they are yet capable. Their free labour, under fair conditions, is the only exchange they can offer for all which civilization can give them. It is their natural and lawful export, and if they could but be made to apprehend their duties and their prospects there would be no more necessity left for violently exporting them to

the West India Islands than there is for our forcibly importing beggars from Ireland, or street-musicians from Italy.

In this substitution, too, of judicious rivalry for blind opposition which is manifestly impending, there will be involved an incidental advantage of no inconsiderable moment. The foreign relations of this country are, it is well known, materially affected by the character of the measures to which we have conscientiously felt ourselves compelled in the cause of humanity. Had these measures been successful we could very well have set off the achievement against the embarrassment, but, as it is, we have been condemned to the double penalty of disagreeable interference and invariable discomfiture. As soon, however, as we begin to direct our efforts more sensibly, we may not only anticipate greater success but less inconvenient retaliation. Competition can never be complained of, though direct hostility may be. Whatever may be the triumph of our new endeavours, and how thoroughly soever they may supersede the system to which we are opposed, they can never be made the subject of overt remonstrance. There will be an end of all diplomatic protests and nice points of international law. We have surely as much right to hire negroes as others to steal them, and the fair rivalry of our sugar plantations can excite no more just indignation than the superiority of our machinery.

We are heartily glad to see the question at length