

**A SHORT REVIEW OF THE REPORTS OF
THE AFRICAN INSTITUTION, AND OF THE
CONTROVERSY WITH DR. THORPE, WITH
SOME REASONS AGAINST THE REGISTRY
OF SLAVES IN THE BRITISH COLONIES**

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A short review of the reports of the African institution, and of the controversy with dr. Thorpe, with some reasons against the registry of slaves in the british colonies by Gilbert Mathison

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GILBERT MATHISON

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The Reports
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AFRICAN INSTITUTION,
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CONTROVERSY WITH DR. THORPE,
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SOME REASONS
AGAINST
THE REGISTRY OF SLAVES
IN THE
British Colonies.

By GILBERT MATHISON, Esq.

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1816.

ADVERTISEMENT.

THE Author of the following pages had long felt an anxious desire to see bettered the condition of the black population of our West India Islands; and, with a view to the accomplishment of that important object, had, some years ago, contributed his mite by the publication of a pamphlet, entitled "Notices respecting Jamaica," in which the subject was freely canvassed "without favour to the enthusiasm nor fear of the prejudices of any person," and various methods pointed out, which, according to his view of the subject, might be mutually advantageous to master and slave. He did hope, sooner or later, to discover that he had thus laid the foundation of progressive good. He has now the satisfaction to think that his labours have not been misapplied; and he has

the confidence at the same time to believe, that, if the spirit of his work had had more general and extensive influence, some part of the pretence, though no part of the motive, for a violent innovation might have been prevented.

He never will cease to afford his hearty co-operation, by all safe, rational, and constitutional methods; but he cannot silently allow his name to be coupled in any shape with a project, which, whatever may be the real motives for bringing it before Parliament, does nothing less than aim a deadly blow at the fundamental principles of the colonial system.

Whatever may be said of the *abstract right* of the legislative body of this kingdom to interpose in any form, or at any time, to shift its line of policy with respect to the colonies, or even to subvert the fabric raised with the sanction of successive administrations, during a course of one hundred and fifty years, he can safely deny the *moral right* of Parliament in this case, and as confidently deny the existence of a *true sterling feeling* in the attempt to accomplish the enfranchisement of the negro, at any period, by the

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disfranchisement of a most valuable body of British subjects, who have established themselves, under the encouragement of British Law, and the protection and security of a Constitutional Charter, in the West India Islands.

Sincere an advocate as he is for the diffusion of the blessings of civilized life and of rational freedom over the surface of the whole world, he is yet no citizen of the world in so extensive a sense as to wish to promote the happiness of other nations, either barbarous or civilized, by debasing the political condition of any class of British subjects, and the author of "Reasons for establishing a Registry of Slaves in the British Colonies,"* has done him no more than justice in stating that his views were disclosed "for a different practical purpose."

He had nothing in view but the improvement of the condition of the negro subject, by *straight forward* means, by the fair operation of a principle, developed by the abolition law, which, when

* See Reasons for establishing a Registry, p. 17, Note.

properly set in action, could not fail, as he conceived, to produce the most happy result, namely, the identity of interest, in a moral sense, between master and slave, by which the former must, by a sort of re-action, be benefited by every act of well-judged benevolence towards the slave, and the latter be gradually qualified by a course of moral, religious, and intellectual improvement, for a well-digested and rational freedom, which might at any time be conferred on him by the indulgence of his master for faithful conduct or valuable services: a most interesting and important contemplation, which, however interesting and important it may be, seems to fall very short of the "practical purpose" kept in view by the leading directors of the African Institution.

In one sense it would be difficult to over-rate the public services of the body of dissenters of different sects; for, by the successful efforts of their zeal, they have, at last, awakened the slumbering zeal of the professional members of the established church, and by an indirect operation as well as by positive charitable institutions, have

given a most useful impulse to the work of moral and intellectual improvement among the lower orders of society throughout the United Kingdoms.

Whether the duty of religious instruction should be undertaken in the West India Islands by the ministers of the Church of England, or by missionary preachers, is a question which admits of an easy solution, and might be best answered by reverting to the old worn out arguments in favour of the established national church, which, happily for the interests of humanity, have long been set at rest. But there is one consideration, which must have a powerful influence on the minds of the colonial assemblies, and that is, a consideration of the duty of self-preservation as it regards both their lives and property.

Every minister of the established church is a known acknowledged character; his moral principles, his religious doctrines, his qualification in every sense as a teacher of the Gospel, either are or may be known by the Bishop within whose jurisdiction the West India Islands lie. On the contrary, who is to define the character or qualifications of a missionary or itinerant preacher? He

may or may not be a most benevolent personage, with the spirit of true charity diffused throughout his life and preachings ; he may or may not be a contemptible hypocrite of the lowest class, with benevolence on his lips, and the blackest passions predominant in his heart ; he may or may not be a visionary enthusiast, and, with the best intentions, though without common sense, ready to set fire, by his dangerous experiments, to the combustible materials collected in that corner of the world.

There cannot be a better or more powerful instrument than Christianity, in the hands of judicious reflecting ministers, for promoting the work of civilization wherever it may be required. Neither can there be a more mischievous instrument in the hands of designing demagogues, who, under the mask of extraordinary sanctity, may mean to disseminate the most poisonous political opinions. In this country such mischiefs find an easy antidote in the good sense and positive intellectual condition of the mass of the people ; but in the West India Islands, where the mass of the black population still continues in a state of the grossest