

To the Editor of the *Glasgow Courier*, 15 March 1792

SIR,

The adherents of the AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE appear now to be sensible, that they must reason upon the subject, and that mere exclamations and complaints against vain philosophy, and the enthusiasm of humanity, will no longer be regarded by the public. Among a few other attempts of this nature, I lately met, in your Paper, with a letter, under the signature of COLUMBUS, in which the writer boldly defends the practice of Slavery, and maintains that its abolition by Government would be contrary to justice. I shall beg leave to offer a few remarks upon that extraordinary performance; and if it should be found, that I belong to that unhappy race of men, who have been the object of this barbarous traffic, I hope the public will give the more indulgence to any errors or mistakes which I may fall into, or to any impropriety of expression which may escape me.

COLUMBUS begins with complaining, that his adversaries, instead of printing the *whole* evidence taken by the Committee of the Commons, have garbled and selected such parts of it as suited their own views and purposes." It is submitted to the public, whether this be a candid insinuation. The abstract of the evidence, which has been published and circulated, is avowed to contain an abridgement of the evidence only that was brought by the Petitioners; but that it is an unfair or partial abridgement, no person, it is believed, will venture to allege.

It exhibits a simple statement of the cruelties with which we have been treated, and the various enormities arising from the Slave Trade, in all its branches. The evidence brought on the other side, by adducing witnesses who, from their situation and rank, had not seen these enormities, can be of little importance. It is merely of a *negative kind*, which can have no weight in opposition to such a large and solid body of *positive testimony*. But if the supporters of the Slave Trade think otherwise, why have they not produced this negative evidence? Why do they complain of what they themselves might so easily rectify? Or rather, how can it be believed, that if this publication could have been of any service to their cause, it would not have appeared long ago? Would they have taken so much pains in retailing the misrepresentations in the Speech made by the white of St. Domingo, and in spreading groundless reports of the insurrections and disorders committed by the Negroes in the other Islands, if they had been capable of producing any real facts to palliate their conduct, if they could have produced a single rag to cover them from the shame to which they stand exposed in the eyes of the whole world?

After this preface, Columbus opens his defence of Slavery, by observing, that Providence, for wise purposes, has formed mankind of different abilities and ranks, and linked them together in a chain of mutual dependence; from which he appears to conclude, that, in this chain, the Negroes were intended to be Slaves.

I am no stranger to this claim of *natural superiority* over my countrymen, which the white people are so ready to advance. But are not the many disadvantages we lie under, with regard to the cultivation of our minds, sufficient, in a great measure, to account for the inferiority of our endowments?

The superior education enjoyed by the free people of the West Indies, may, on the other hand, go some length in accounting for that superiority of talents, and for that refinement of manners, for which they are so much distinguished.

In how many parts of the world, are even white people plunged in utter darkness and barbarism? In what a miserable state were the Britons, when they admitted the practice of selling their own children? If the Negroes appear to the Europeans in a meaner light than other rude nations, it may be attributed to that very slavery into which they have been reduced, and by which their minds are peculiarly debased. May I not, at the same time, be permitted the vanity of observing, that Egypt, the nursery of science in Europe, was originally inhabited by people of similar colour and features to those unfortunate Africans, who are, at this day, treated with so much contempt?

But admitting that the Negroes are inferior in abilities to every other people upon earth, will it thence be inferred, that it is lawful to injure and oppress them, and to deprive them of those rights which belong to all other men? Is it by such a system of morality, that white men propose to demonstrate their superiority over the Negroes? Is it by a doctrine so absurd, that Columbus means to assert that rank of understanding, by which he supposes himself to be placed at the upper end of what he calls the chain of human dependence? Is wisdom given us by providence, that we may impose upon folly? Are we endowed with strength, that we may be enabled to prey upon the weak. Are we not all children of the same father, possessed of an immortal soul, equally accountable for the deeds done in this life? But it is observed by a great author, that Europeans have been in the right, not to allow us to be men; lest, if we were, a suspicion might arise that they are *no longer Christians*.

To prop a little the foregoing argument, from the natural inequality of ranks, your correspondent is pleased to mention, in justification of slavery that it arose from the operations of war and conquest; “whereby[,]” he says, “captives became the property of the conquerors.” Concerning this *right of conquest*, it is not my intention to employ many words. It seems now to be admitted by every person of a liberal mind, that superior force can never bestow upon a conqueror any right which he did not previously possess. To suppose the contrary, is to suppose that mere power is the foundation of right, and that every man is entitled to do whatever he has the opportunity of executing. According to this hypothesis, which, to the scandal of jurisprudence, was formerly too much countenanced, the people detained in slavery, whenever they acquire the power, have a right to cut their masters’ throats; and, if on that occasion, instead of putting them to death, should oblige their masters

to perpetual service, under the discipline of the *Jumper* [whip] it would be an act of lenity and mercy.

But Columbus has only touched upon these particulars, as he hastens to his main object, which is to prove, that if the Legislature shall abolish the African Slave Trade, it is bound, in justice, to indemnify the West India Traders for the loss which they may sustain upon that account.

The British government, he contends, has introduced and promoted this very slavery, and bestowed upon it the sanction of different acts of parliament. The planters and traders were, in that business, the mere tools of the Legislature, and purchased their estates, or employed their capitals, upon the faith of government; which, therefore, will be forfeited if, without their consent, that slavery, *how immoral soever and unjust in itself*, should be withdrawn and prohibited.

It may in the first place, be remarked, that this writer is guilty of a little misrepresentation, when he insinuates that government took the lead in the introduction of the African Slave Trade. It is well known, that when domestic slavery had been abolished in Europe, it was revived in America by the obstinacy of the European settlers, and in opposition to the remonstrances and prohibitions of the mother country. The settlers urged the necessity of slavery for procuring labourers; and my unfortunate countrymen, without any colour of justice, were dragged from a distant land, and substituted to the weaker and more effeminate natives of America.

The Spanish government first, and the other European governments afterwards, were obliged to comply with their refractory subjects, and to connive at an evil which they were unable to prevent.

But the times are now altered. The meridian beams of knowledge have now brought to light those enormous abuses, which were hid from the public eye; and the feelings of an enlightened age are shocked by a treatment of our fellow creatures so repugnant to the plain rules of justice. The interested clamours of avarice will no longer be endured; and men conscious of the iniquity of their former conduct, must be willing to atone for it, by hastening to abolish those practices, which they blush to have ever permitted.

With all my heart, says Columbus; let this trade be as wicked and unjust as you please. Let it be abolished whenever you think fit. But, the bond! The bond! Justice requires that we be indemnified.

In answer to this demand, I will beg leave to state a parallel case. In all the European Kingdoms, a few centuries ago, every feudal baron enjoyed the privilege of making private war, that is, of robbing and plundering all his neighbours. This privilege was universally

admitted, and sanctioned by public authority. But in more civilized ages, a practice, so inconsistent with justice and good order, came to be entirely prohibited. Might not anyone of those plunderers, with equal reason to your correspondent Columbus, have demanded an indemnification for the pecuniary loss which he sustained.

“I laid out my capital in this manner, I became a feudal baron, upon the faith of the law as it stood. I was but the tool of government, which encouraged and assisted me in settling in this part of the country. During a good Michaelmas moon, I could have seized many hundred head of Cattle; but of this, and all *similar* gains, I am now totally deprived. If my neighbours had offended me, I might have murdered or carried off their wives and their children. But I must now tamely put up with every affront. By these new-fangled and unjust regulations, there will be an entire stagnation of all the business of society.”

What answer would a sovereign be entitled to make to any of his subjects who had the effrontery to talk to him in this manner? “You are mistaken in thinking that you have a right to rob, or steal, or murder. Though the public was obliged to temporize, and to connive at your practices, they could give you no right to commit crimes. But though the law was bad enough of itself, you have rendered it a thousand times worse by your abuse of it. Instead of indemnification you deserve punishment; and were you to meet with a proper retribution for your offences, the least you could expect is, in the language of the old Scottish historian, *that you should be justified*”.

Such is the answer which, I think, might with propriety be given to Columbus, were it proposed instantly to abolish the institution of slavery in the West Indies. But he knows very well that no such thing is intended; and he has taken a poetical license in stating the facts, that he might obtain the shadow of an argument from his own erroneous statement. The known intention of the proposed application to parliament is, not to abolish, but to regulate the servitude of the West India Negroes. When the further importation of Negroes is prohibited, the planters will be under the necessity of rearing from the slaves which they already possess, and of treating them with some degree of humanity. It is the universal belief that all other attempts for protecting this unfortunate class of men, in the European colonies, will be fruitless, and that all proposals of regulation, by the inhabitants themselves, are mere pretences which will have no effect after the present investigation shall be laid aside.

Now I would ask, whether the British government has a right from views of justice and utility to regulate the trade and manufactures of the kingdom? or whether every regulation of the national commerce must be accompanied with an indemnification to all those who pretend to be suffered by the alteration? When a tax is laid on claret, must the wine merchants be paid for the diminution of their trade in that article? When there is a prohibition of whisky, on account of it being prejudicial to the health or the morals of the people, must there be a pecuniary compensation to the distillers of that spirit, or to the growers of barley?

After all, it is time to inquire what reason Columbus has to apprehend any loss whatever from the proposed regulation. It is clearly proved that, with proper management, the stock of slaves already in the Islands will be sufficient to maintain itself. By allowing them some gratuity, as a reward for extraordinary labour, it is evident that their industry, their skill, and their dexterity, may be wonderfully increased. Thus, by a gradual alteration without any hazard of disorder, the condition of the Negroes may be improved; and even the prospect will arise, that their future emancipation, at a distant period perhaps, may be found of general advantage. At the end of the eighteenth century, when the British House of Commons are every day quoting the celebrated author of “the Wealth of Nations”; and when the eyes of the mercantile world are so much opened to perceive the mischievous tendency of monopoly and restraint in every branch of commerce, is it not a curious spectacle, to observe, that in every part of his Majesty’s dominions, there still is a class of restrainers upon trade, so destitute of information, and so overrun with prejudice, as to imagine that the emancipation of the labourers, proceeding from the gradual operation of their masters, would not be beneficial change? I agree with Columbus in thinking that, in point of abilities, mankind are composed of different ranks. At the same time when Sir Isaac Newton discovered the true system of the universe, there were persons, of some education, who still believed in judicial astrology, and the influence of the stars. If the inferiority of un[der]standing in my countrymen lays a foundation for supposing them an *inferior race* to the whites, one would almost be tempted to believe, that there is no variety of *races* even among the white people themselves.

GUSTAVUS