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British Abolitionists in Cuba, 1833-1845

The abolition of slavery within the British empire in 1833 had a revolutionary impact on Britain's West Indian colonies, but the Caribbean effects of this humanitarianism were not confined to British colonies.¹ The influence of British abolitionist ideas and subsequently of British abolitionists themselves spread quickly from Jamaica to the nearest and largest of the remaining slave plantation colonies of the Caribbean, Spain's "ever-faithful" Cuba. Cuban planters and Spanish colonial officials knew only too well that it had been British pressure on Spain to abolish the slave trade, after Britain herself had prohibited it, which had led to the Anglo-Spanish treaty of 1817 and its successor in 1835 prohibiting the slave trade to Cuba. The abolition of slavery within British colonial possessions portended a similar campaign to eliminate slavery in Cuba.² Within the island abolitionism was viewed as a foreign import which, in the eyes of the European planter class and Spanish officials, was a foreign menace. In an ironic and unwitting interaction of British colonial and foreign policy, the emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies provoked a greater reaction in Cuba than the long and persistent effort of British officials to stop the Cuban slave trade.

The Cuban government, supported every step of the way from Madrid, took all possible precautions to prevent abolitionist ideas from seeping into the island. Beginning in the late 1820's as the campaign against slavery in the British Empire began to gather strength, Cuban authorities enacted a series of measures to guard the island against this intangible enemy. The measures were similar to those in force after the Saint Domingue revolution and they were implemented in a growing atmosphere of emotion and hysteria which also was reminiscent of the 1790's. The Cuban planters were now so conscious of the vulnerability of their slave-built prosperity they began to develop a siege mentality. They saw themselves as living in a beleaguered fortress where they had to be always on the alert lest the enemy launch an attack from an unexpected quarter or try a new ruse to catch them offguard.

Miguel Tacón's appointment as Captain-General of Cuba in 1834 opened a new stage in the Spanish struggle to preserve Cuba from the fate of its neighbours, Jamaica and Haiti. His own reactionary ideas did nothing to calm the anxiety of the peninsulars and Cuban creoles. Tacón saw abolitionism as one of the chief dangers besetting the island, closely followed by the Cuban creoles' desire for political rights and the acquisitive designs on Cuba by Britain and the

United States. No political concessions could be contemplated in such a dangerous climate and repression was the answer to all threats whether internal or external. Tacón described the abolitionist dangers surrounding Cuba in a despatch dated 31 August 1835 and sent both to the Minister of the Interior, then in charge of overseas colonies, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs.³ It was bad enough that large numbers of freed African slaves lived in Jamaica and Haiti, "filled with exaggerated ideas of liberty and equality," but worse they were supported by a large party in Europe whose aim was the triumph of the Africans over the Europeans. He enclosed an anonymous letter which he had received warning of the activities of the Methodists who had translated the Bible into many languages, changing the text to inspire ideas of absolute equality in all classes and especially among slaves. Methodist agents reportedly were in Jamaica and had a huge supply of Bibles waiting to be introduced into Cuba in whatever way possible. To Tacón this Methodist activity clearly was aimed at subverting Cuba's slaves.

Further proof had come with the discovery of a figurine of a kneeling slave in chains with the English inscription "Exodus, chapter 21, verse 16."⁴ The Captain-General had ordered the Military Commission to investigate the appearance of the figurine, but this body was unable to discover who had brought it into Cuba. Apart from a conviction that the figurine had been made in Britain and brought over to Cuba from Jamaica and a belief that it was not the only example, the Cuban authorities were totally baffled. When Tacón's description of these incidents reached Spain, Mendizábal, the head of the Spanish liberal government, applauded his vigilance. To both the peninsular and Cuban governments the lesson was evident; no abolitionist emissary must be allowed into Cuba.⁵

The next wave of abolitionist panic to break over Tacón's administration began early in 1836 with the report by a captain of a Cuban schooner, the *Nueva Esperanza*, that when he had put into Gran Cayman island he had found 5,000 free blacks there, some of whom had robbed him. The captain had obviously exaggerated his tale for effect but Tacón, instead of investigating the affair thoroughly before acting, assumed this was part of the anti-slavery campaign being waged against Cuba from Jamaica and prepared to meet the expected invasion. When the Governor of Matanzas later repeated this rumour, Tacón convened a meeting of the leading officials of Cuba which recommended an immediate increase in the number of naval vessels patrolling on the south side of the island.⁶ The invasion did not materialize and no one ever located the 5,000 free blacks but the damage had been done. Each new rumour, whether true or not, reinforced the spectre of an abolitionist menace threatening Cuba with violent revolution.

The Gran Cayman incident also prompted Tacón to send a naval officer to Jamaica on a secret mission to report on anti-slavery societies there. His findings supported Tacón's own views and provided useful material for justifying the Captain-General's actions to Madrid. Captain Apodaca, the man chosen to spy

on the abolitionists, reflected the bias of his superiors and, obviously anxious to do a good job, was careful not to underestimate anything that might be of importance to Cuba. He might have entitled his report with his first sentence about the Methodists; "the Methodist churches dominate the whole island". Apodaca's report confirmed what the Cuban government already believed; the British government was using the Methodists as agents to destroy Cuba by fomenting slave rebellion. Tacón quickly sent off copies of the report to Madrid as additional evidence of the British conspiracy against Cuba.⁷

By 1837, Tacón could point to other incidents to justify his repressive measures. That year Spanish authorities captured a mulatto in the Matanzas area who had come from the Bahamas and who, on his own admission, had passed out abolitionist literature. Apparently fearful of taking stronger action against a British subject, the Captain-General had him deported, although he argued the need for more severe punishment in his despatch on the case.⁸ When the British consul at Havana reported this arrest to the British Foreign Office, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, ordered him to protest strongly against any punishment inflicted on a man "for merely distributing Tracts in favour of the abolition of Slavery, if there was nothing in those Tracts which was addressed to the Negroes and which could be considered as exciting them to Rebellion."⁹ This Palmerstonian distinction between proper and improper abolitionist activity was unlikely to convince anyone in Cuba of the legitimacy of British abolitionist practices, but the British consul, David Tolmé, credited his own intervention, following Palmerston's instructions, with obtaining a sentence of banishment instead of the capital punishment specified in Spanish law.¹⁰ Captain-General Tacón had interpreted Tolmé's involvement very differently, viewing it as unusual and therefore proof of how much influence the Methodists exercised on the British government.

It was in this irrational climate of enhanced fear where every foreigner, especially a British subject, who visited Cuba was suspected of being an abolitionist, that James Thompson, a member of the British and Foreign Bible Society, came to Cuba in June, 1837 as part of a general tour of the Caribbean islands. Completely ignorant of Cuban suspicions of foreign missionaries, he had come well-prepared for his work, carrying two cases of Bibles, containing over three hundred in all. He advertised his wares in Havana and sold a number of Bibles to local booksellers. Then he proceeded to tour several other leading Cuban towns before he reached Santiago de Cuba where, to his astonishment, he was arrested as an abolitionist agent. Thompson described his plight in a letter to the Secretary of the Bible Society; "it was conceived, as I understood, that I was travelling through the island with some evil designs in regard to the government of the country, on the slave question . . .".¹¹ Thompson was more explicit in a later letter written from Jamaica after he had been banished from Cuba:

I gathered from the Collector's [of Customs, Santiago] conversation the strong impression made on his mind and on the minds of others, that your

society was in truth a part and portion of the Antislavery society, and further, that your main object in circulating the Bible was to lead the people to rebel and destroy the whites and thus to accomplish the object, which they imagine the British Government has, of making an end of Cuba as a Spanish Colony. Hence their suspicions of me and all their investigations.¹²

Nothing in Thompson's letters suggests any connection with British abolitionists either in Britain or in Jamaica, and the open, indeed naive, manner in which he toured Cuba indicates he was there only to distribute Bibles and not to preach abolitionist doctrines. The Cuban authorities who, surprisingly in light of their precautions against the entry of abolitionists, were unaware of his presence until he arrived at Santiago de Cuba, saw Thompson's mission in a much more sinister light. He had been sent to Cuba to promote slave rebellion. Reporting Thompson's arrest to Madrid, Captain-General Tacón summed up the Cuban government's view of the abolitionists; "the aim of all the fanatics who call themselves friends of the Africans is to light the fires of revolution in our island through the violent emancipation of the slaves".¹³

Tacón's alarming reports to Madrid were buttressed by a petition from the *Ayuntamiento*, or municipal corporation, of Havana in September, 1837. A copy of *The Abolitionist*, published in Britain by the Anti-Slavery Society, had come into its hands and this was enough, when coupled with the recent cases of abolitionists in Cuba, to prompt the *Ayuntamiento* to ask the metropolitan government either to act on its own against British and American abolitionists or to denounce them to the British and United States governments (Cuban officials were equally fearful of abolitionism emanating from the United States).¹⁴ The Spanish government, acting on the *Ayuntamiento's* request, sent diplomatic notes to both the British and United States Ministers in Madrid early in 1838, formally protesting against the actions of foreign abolitionist organizations directed at Cuba.¹⁵ The Spanish Foreign Minister did not believe the notes would have much effect and the replies proved him correct.¹⁶ Their real purpose, however, was to warn the British and United States governments that Spain would not allow foreign agents to foment rebellion among Cuba's slaves and thus serve to prepare the way for criminal charges to be laid against any more agents caught in Cuba.¹⁷

This series of incidents, and the interpretation placed upon them by Cuban and Spanish officials, had convinced both colonial and metropolitan governments that British abolitionists, supported by the British government, were carrying on a well co-ordinated abolitionist campaign against Cuban slavery. This conviction aroused an almost hysterical fear among the European population and government officials which grew into near panic when a British official, Dr. R.R. Madden, reputed to be a committed abolitionist, was appointed to a new post in Havana. His appearance seemed to add credibility to the Cuban belief in a British abolitionist conspiracy.

Britain had signed a supplementary slave trade treaty with Spain in 1835. As well as provisions designed to strengthen the mutual right of search conceded in

the original treaty of 1817, an annex to the 1835 treaty dealt with the fate of slaves on captured slave ships, known as *emancipados* or liberated slaves. Labour shortages in Britain's own West Indian islands as a result of the abolition of slavery, plus tales of the mistreatment of *emancipados* in Cuba, were the reasons the British government agreed to receive into the British colonies any African slaves freed by British seizures of slave vessels. In 1836 the British government decided to send someone to Havana to look after the transfer of *emancipados* to British colonies, believing large numbers of Africans might be involved.

After consultation between the British Foreign Office and the Colonial Office, Dr. Richard Robert Madden was chosen to go to Cuba as the Superintendent of Liberated Africans.¹⁸ Madden was an Irish doctor who was picked for the job because of his medical background and his recent experience in the Caribbean as a stipendiary magistrate in Jamaica. Madden had given up his medical career after the passage of the British Emancipation Act and the British government had sent him to Jamaica as one of the magistrates who were to enforce the provisions of the Act. His short career in Jamaica had been a controversial one because he had insisted on treating the former slaves on an equal basis with all other British subjects. He resigned after being involved in several incidents which had revealed the increasing hostility of the planters to him. He returned to Britain to campaign against the apprenticeship system which had replaced slavery in the British West Indies. He published a book containing his criticisms and testified before a Parliamentary Select Committee on the working of the apprenticeship system.¹⁹ Madden was a dedicated humanitarian and abolitionist, both points in his favour as far as the British government was concerned, but there is no indication whatsoever that his Cuban appointment was part of a British plot to start a slave rebellion there.

When the British government informed Spain of Madden's appointment, the Spanish government, not yet aware of his background, expressed no opposition and asked only that every effort be made to prevent large numbers of freed Africans congregating in Havana where they would be a dangerous example to the slave population.²⁰ It did not take long, however, for the storm clouds to cross the Atlantic. Captain-General Tacón wrote a confidential despatch, shortly after Madden's arrival in Havana, which left the Spanish government in no doubt that it had been duped into allowing an abolitionist agent into Cuba in an official position and one in which he would have the full support of the British government. Tacón had heard of Madden's appointment even before the royal order announcing it had reached Havana and Madden's reputation, based on his controversial stay in Jamaica and on his writings, also had preceded him. To say the least, Madden was unwelcome in Cuba. As the Captain-General wrote, "Dr. Madden is a dangerous man from whatever point of view he is considered, and living in this Island he will have far too many opportunities to disseminate seditious ideas directly or indirectly, which not even my constant vigilance can prevent".²¹

No sooner had Madden landed in Havana than the clashes between him and the Captain-General began. Madden desired a depot on land where emancipated Africans could be housed before being transferred to one of the British West Indian islands. There were, he maintained, certain necessary sanitary precautions before these transfers could take place, such as the purification of the slave ship before transporting the Africans and the separation of the sick from the healthy to reduce the risk of transmitting cholera to British colonies. But in spite of Madden's continual reassurances that he would do everything possible to prevent an accumulation of *emancipados* in Havana, Captain-General Tacón remained adamant in his refusal to permit any *emancipados* to land. They would be forced to remain on the captured slave ship until the British removed them. In his correspondence with Madden, Tacón gave medical reasons as the justification for this harsh policy, but in his despatches to Madrid he identified Madden's abolitionism as the real cause of his fear. The danger was not easy to describe; "the evil consequences of this affair are easier to understand than to explain".²²

Tacón's refusal to allow any emancipated slaves from captured slave ships to land at Havana created a crisis that was hypothetical only as long as no captured slavers were brought to Havana. The capture of the Spanish brig *Empresa* in October, 1836 with more than 400 African slaves on board transformed the dispute. As soon as they heard of the capture, Madden and his fellow commissioner, Schenley, wrote to the Captain-General repeating their request that the Africans be permitted to land temporarily, but Tacón again flatly refused.²³ When the problem was brought to his attention, the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, decided the only way to avoid the obstacles put up by Tacón was to station a British ship at Havana to receive the Africans. He instructed the British Minister at Madrid to obtain Spanish approval which was granted early in 1837.²⁴

The arrival of the British hulk, *Romney*, at Havana in August, 1837 solved the problem of where to house the liberated Africans until their transfer to a British colony could be arranged, but Tacón saw the *Romney* as another phase of the subtle British abolitionist campaign against Cuba. The British government had given orders that black soldiers of one of the West Indian regiments should man the ship, and the *Romney* arrived with a crew of fifteen uniformed, black, British soldiers, later to be supplemented by fifteen more. Coming at the same time as the arrest of a British mulatto who was handing out abolitionist propaganda and the arrest of a representative of the British and Foreign Bible Society, Tacón's suspicions were instantly sharpened. Madden loomed larger in the minds of the Cuban authorities as the mastermind of this spreading conspiracy. Acting on the basis of a royal order issued earlier in the spring of 1837 which banned the admission to Cuba of any free blacks from foreign territories, Tacón demanded that the soldiers be replaced by white soldiers and in the meantime he refused to permit them to land on Cuban soil. He also redoubled his efforts to have Madden removed from the island.²⁵

Tacón was unable to force Madden's recall and Madden remained in Cuba for two more years. On the other side, the British government was not much more successful in persuading the Cuban authorities to allow the black soldiers of the *Romney* to go on shore even for limited periods. This was not permitted until 1839 and then only under very careful safeguards. Tacón's immediate successor, Captain-General Espeleta, who came to Cuba in 1838, typified the reaction which the *Romney* and its soldiers evoked among Spanish officialdom and the Cuban planter class in a despatch to Madrid. He was convinced British abolitionist societies had sent them to instil ideas of liberty and revolution in Cuba's slave population. Black soldiers imbued with abolitionist ideas and dressed in British uniforms, he said, "will just by their words and dress arouse in those of their race a strong desire for freedom at any cost and in defiance of all danger. The very sight of those soldiers presents serious difficulties which are easier to perceive than to describe".²⁶ Others, too, noticed and in some cases shared the anti-British feeling which increased after the *Romney's* appearance. An American annexationist, Richard Kimball, writing in 1850 was able to use the *Romney* episode to bolster his case for American annexation of the island on the grounds of the British threat to Cuban slavery; "these soldiers . . . were the first instruments of spreading discontent among the slave population".²⁷

By 1838 the recently arrived British commission judge at Havana, James Kennedy, was urging the withdrawal of the *Romney* because of the trouble it had caused. Palmerston opposed this solution and the *Romney* remained in Havana harbour until it was finally sold to the Spanish government in 1845.²⁸ To British abolitionists the presence of the *Romney* had a powerful moral effect; to the Cuban government it was a much more sinister symbol, conjuring up the image of abolitionist societies who worked, in the words of one Captain-General, "for the complete abolition of slavery, even at the cost of the white race".²⁹ Or, as a modern Cuban historian, Fernando Ortiz, concluded, "it was a bulwark of abolitionism in the heart of a slave society".³⁰

Madden's role in Cuba was not confined to his job as Superintendent of Liberated Africans. He made contacts with Cuban creoles opposed to the slave trade in an effort to stimulate an effective Cuban public opinion as well as to obtain information which could be used in Britain. Although Madden's purpose was to encourage Cubans willing to protest the continuation of the slave trade, the Cuban government interpreted such contacts as an attempt to involve Cubans in a foreign abolitionist conspiracy. Since the Cubans in 1837 had been denied any political representation in the Spanish Cortes, the creole grievances extended well beyond the slave trade. They saw the existence of the slave trade, however, as one of the major obstacles in the way of political advances. To talk of a Cuban abolitionist movement as such in the island in the 1830's and 40's would be an exaggeration, but there were individual creoles prepared to defy the censorship imposed by the metropolitan government and publish condemnations of the slave trade, though not of slavery itself.³¹

José Antonio Saco was the first Cuban creole to attack the slave trade publicly within Cuba. He published an article in a Cuban periodical in 1832 con-

demning its continuation.³² The article created a sensation and when Tacón arrived in Cuba as Captain-General he quickly banished Saco from the island. Saco spent most of his life in exile in Europe campaigning for political reforms in Cuba and writing his major work on the history of African slavery in Spanish America. In a pamphlet published in Paris in 1837, Saco expanded his ideas on the necessity of the complete abolition of the slave trade and attempted to prove that ending the slave trade would not ruin Cuban agriculture. By stopping the importation of African slaves and encouraging the immigration of European labourers, Saco sought to reverse a process which threatened to submerge the Cuban creoles in a plantation colony where they had no political rights and where the threat of race revolution was ever-present. His solution, which never went to the length of advocating the abolition of slavery, was really a means to an end; the achievement of political liberty for Cuban creoles without the loss of their slave property nor of their slave-built prosperity. He articulated the creole fear of the African, a fear reinforced by the memory of Haiti. Ending the slave trade would ease this fear and begin to redress the racial balance in the direction of what Saco was later to describe as the *blanqueamiento*, or the Europeanization, of Cuba.³³

Saco in Europe and his fellow creoles in Cuba, notably Domingo del Monte, thus had little in common with British abolitionists like Madden and later David Turnbull except a mutual hatred of the slave trade. Their co-operation was never close, certainly there was no fusion into a unified abolitionist movement combining Cuban creoles and British abolitionism. Hampered by censorship, persecution and the hostility of Cuban government officials, little was achieved within Cuba. British abolitionists made use of the tenuous contacts they had with creole opponents of the slave trade to gather information which would help to reveal the true nature of Cuban slavery to audiences in Britain. In 1839 Madden persuaded Domingo del Monte to answer a questionnaire covering all aspects of slavery and the slave trade which later formed the basis of an address by Madden to the Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in June, 1840. The Anti-Slavery Society subsequently financed the publication of the address as part of its program to inform the British public of the horrors of slavery in different parts of the world.³⁴

The convening of the Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840 signalled the peak of a revived British abolitionist movement now focussing attention on the elimination of the slave trade and slavery in foreign countries. From the 1820's British abolitionists had been largely indifferent to the foreign slave trade, leaving it to the British Foreign Office to enforce the treaties for its suppression. With the abolition of slavery inside the British empire and the termination of the apprenticeship system in the British Caribbean islands five years later, British abolitionists led by Thomas Fowell Buxton and Joseph Sturge turned their attention to those areas of the world where the slave trade and slavery still existed. The United States, naturally, was the chief target in the Americas, closely followed

by Brazil and Cuba where the slave trade flourished in spite of treaties outlawing it. Joseph Sturge was the moving spirit behind the creation of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in 1839 and under its auspices the Anti-Slavery Convention met in 1840, bringing together for the first time leaders of the American and British abolitionist movements.³⁵ Buxton, although a nominal member of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, in fact had very little to do with it. Instead, he concentrated his attention on the foreign slave trade. In 1838, he published *The Slave Trade* attacking the structure Britain herself had constructed to destroy the Atlantic slave trade. Two years later he published a second edition which contained his remedy; Britain should concentrate her efforts on civilizing Africa, substituting legitimate commerce for the slave trade.³⁶

Buxton was not the only person in Britain, however, to propose ways of eliminating the foreign slave trade in 1840. Of far greater importance for Cuba was the publication of David Turnbull's *Travels in the West* that same year containing his ideas for ending the foreign slave trade.³⁷ Turnbull had been a correspondent for the *Times* in Europe and had lived in Madrid when Britain and Spain were negotiating the slave trade treaty of 1835. *Travels in the West* was dedicated to George Villiers, Earl of Clarendon, the British Minister at Madrid who had been responsible for the treaty negotiations and who had apparently stirred Turnbull's interest in the problem of the slave trade. Turnbull resigned from the *Times* in 1837 and the next year he travelled to the West Indies.³⁸ Out of this trip came his book which, in addition to being a first rate travel account of Cuba, received considerable public notice because of his graphic description of slavery in the island and his proposal for combatting the slave trade.

Turnbull's solution, in contrast to Buxton's, was to check the slave trade by hitting at the demand for slaves. His plan was applicable to both Brazil and the Spanish colonies but, if implemented, it was bound to have the greatest impact on the Spanish colonies where the legal prohibition of the slave trade had been in force longer. Owing to his travels in the Spanish colonies, Turnbull saw Cuba as the ideal testing ground for his ideas. The essence of the scheme depended on the court of mixed commission in Havana being given more extensive powers. This court had been established by the original Anglo-Spanish treaty of 1817 prohibiting the slave trade, and consisted of a British and Spanish judge plus a commissioner of arbitration from each country. The court's sole function was to decide whether or not a captured slave ship had violated the treaty provisions and, accordingly, whether the ship was a lawful prize and its slaves illegally taken; if not, the court restored the ship and the slaves to the owner.³⁹

Turnbull believed that, by amending the existing treaty, the court at Havana could be given the power to operate under Spanish law and hear suits brought by or on behalf of individual Africans seeking their freedom on the grounds that they had been illegally imported after the prohibition of the slave trade. One or two successes would strike at the heart of the slaveowner's vested property right in the illegally imported African. As Turnbull put it, "the first consequence would be to produce a radical and practical change in the legal condition of the

imported African".⁴⁰ Turnbull's plan was far more radical than Buxton's proposal since it would amount virtually to a social revolution within a slave society in spite of Turnbull's specious argument that no danger of a chain reaction among the slaves existed because the court would only be empowered to hear single cases.

David Turnbull was not content just to present his proposal to the British public. He had all the zeal of a convert and certainly saw for himself a key role in the implementation of his ideas. After sending a copy of his book to Lord Palmerston, he followed this up early in February, 1840 with a brief outline of his plan. The Foreign Secretary was modestly encouraging in his minute on Turnbull's letter; "glad to receive any further particulars, but fear it would be difficult of execution".⁴¹

Modest encouragement was all Turnbull needed. He proved indefatigable in pressing both himself and his proposals on the Foreign Office. An article in the *Morning Chronicle* early in March, 1840 reviewed his book and set forth details of his plan, and a few days later another article, published in the *Times*, caught the eye of the Secretary of the newly-established British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. Turnbull carefully made sure the Foreign Office was aware of the newspaper articles and the interest of the leading abolitionist society in his plan.⁴² Amid this whirlwind of self-publicity, he had even managed to arrange interviews with two leading officials at the Foreign Office, one the Permanent Under-Secretary, Backhouse. After Palmerston consented to receive further details of his proposal, Turnbull sent a closely argued, forty-five page brief to him.⁴³

Palmerston was sufficiently impressed with this detailed exposition to order the preparation of a draft treaty for presentation to the Spanish government, but he had no illusions about the result; "it is not very likely that we shall persuade the Spanish Government to accede; but if it refuses, the very making of the Proposal will do good . . ." ⁴⁴ Palmerston's hesitations were echoed in other places. The *Morning Chronicle* wrote, "we are far from thinking that it will be as readily conceded by the Spaniards as he [Turnbull] seems to conceive, or as easily carried into execution if conceded".⁴⁵

A well known writer on Africa, MacGregor Laird, was even more critical in a review of both Turnbull's and Buxton's books in the *Westminster Review*. He doubted that anyone in Cuba could be persuaded to testify that a slave had been illegally imported and without such testimony no Spanish judge would be prepared to recognize even the obvious fact of illegal importation. But to think that Spain would ever agree to such a plan was, in Laird's view, utterly naive. If the plan were carried out, said Laird, "it would shake to its foundations, if not destroy, the whole social fabric in Cuba. The very attempt would be sufficient to create a complete revolution in society . . ." ⁴⁶ In spite of reservations both inside and outside the British Foreign Office, Palmerston sent a despatch to the British Minister in Madrid, enclosing a draft treaty and instructing him to present it to the Spanish government.⁴⁷

While the Foreign Office was considering his plan, Turnbull was exploiting his new-found fame as an abolitionist to obtain the official support of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. Turnbull had not been connected in any way with the British abolitionist movement when he first visited Cuba in 1838.⁴⁸ The first evidence linking him with the Anti-Slavery Society dates from 1840 after the publication of his book. He attended two meetings of the Executive Committee of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in April, 1840 and at the second his plan to end the Atlantic slave trade was referred for consideration to the forthcoming general Anti-Slavery Convention. It was then put on the agenda of the Convention and formally adopted.⁴⁹ By the summer of 1840 Turnbull had the satisfaction of seeing his proposal endorsed by the Anti-Slavery Society and implemented by the British government.

Having persuaded the British government to adopt his ideas, Turnbull set about, again successfully, to be appointed British consul at Havana. He had never been diffident about advancing his own claims. Now he wrote a series of letters to the Foreign Office applying for the post of consul and making suggestions about the powers and scope of the position. Turnbull believed the British consul at Havana ought to be the chief agent of the British government in Cuba with overall responsibility for the suppression of the slave trade and possessing the rank of consul-general. He would have under him a number of vice-consuls located in the main outports of the island and a British cruiser, preferably a steamship, at his disposal.⁵⁰ Clearly, Turnbull envisaged his role as that of a British pro-consul, bringing British humanitarianism to a backward area.

Abolitionist pressure was responsible for Turnbull's appointment as Palmerston later admitted to the Spanish Minister.⁵¹ A deputation from the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society had met Palmerston in July, 1840 to present the resolutions of the Anti-Slavery Convention and apparently convinced the Foreign Secretary to accept Turnbull.⁵² There was, however, no thought of acceding to his grandiose suggestions. Had Turnbull been given the powers as consul which he desired, an open clash between Britain and Spain over the illegal slave trade would likely have occurred. Even without these powers his impact upon Cuban society was quite unparalleled.

The Captain-General wrote to the Spanish government in great alarm describing the perils facing the island as a result of Turnbull's appointment. Turnbull may be the only British consul ever to have had his recall demanded before arriving at his post. His abolitionist ideas, even more than the man himself, made him unpalatable. These had preceded him in his book, *Travels in the West*, apparently a best-seller among Spanish officials. The *Westminster Review* containing MacGregor Laird's review had also come to the Captain-General's attention, illustrating how dangerous Turnbull's schemes were. "His ideas are certainly those of that type of reformer who, in exchange for upholding the principle of protecting the Africans, would be capable of sacrificing the white race."⁵³

The Captain-General's urgent request for Turnbull's recall was supported by the leading corporations of Havana, notably the *Junta de Fomento* (Com-

mittee of Development) which petitioned the Captain-General to expel Turnbull a few days after he had reached Havana. The *Junta* saw a sinister connection between Turnbull's plan for increasing the powers of the court of mixed commission and his presence in the island. If Spain agreed to the British request, the court of mixed commission would become an inquisitorial weapon in the hands of British abolitionist agents.⁵⁴

Not surprisingly, when the Spanish government instructed the Captain-General to gather opinions on the so-called Turnbull proposal, the individuals and groups who were asked to respond were carefully selected. Turnbull rightly complained to the British government, "the Evidence that will go to Madrid will come from those who have become wealthy from the slave trade".⁵⁵ The Captain-General was able to report to Madrid that Cuban opinion was unanimously opposed to any extension of the powers of the mixed commission. Acting on Cuban advice, the Spanish government formally rejected the British proposal.⁵⁶ By the time the formal rejection was sent, Sir Robert Peel's Conservatives were in power in Britain and Lord Aberdeen had replaced Palmerston as Foreign Secretary. Aberdeen was not inclined to press the issue, in spite of protests from British abolitionists, and so Turnbull's plan was set aside although not forgotten, particularly in Cuba. The heady days of abolitionist influence on British policy really had gone, but the effects of British abolitionism in Cuba were to linger on.

The publicity given to the Turnbull plan in Cuba and the request for advice from Cuban plantation owners had sent a ripple of shock throughout the island. One of the correspondents of the Cuban creole, Domingo del Monte, provided a very vivid account of Cuban reaction:

Some, filled with terror, believe they have arrived at the awful day of judgement, which their feverish imaginations have painted in the bloodiest of colours: others consider the affair as a legal dispute and hope that with intrigues and deceptions they can make Great Britain's rights as meaningless as those of their own creditors, and with this thought they have calmed themselves a little.⁵⁷

Cuban fears were not allayed even though the British government accepted Spain's refusal to sign a new treaty. Cuban planters had seen with horror that if Spain had succumbed to British pressure slavery in the island was doomed. After 1841, the Turnbull plan lay gathering dust on Britain's diplomatic shelf, but many Cubans feared that it could be resurrected at any time. As late as 1853, the Spanish government, with the Turnbull experience in mind, rejected a British request to grant additional powers to the court of mixed commission. British attempts to suppress the Cuban slave trade in co-operation with Spain were bedevilled by Spanish fear of the abolitionist menace which Turnbull personified.

Turnbull remained in Havana as British consul for two years while the Spanish government tried frantically to have him removed. An unceasing flow of

increasingly hysterical complaints about him poured into Madrid from Havana and, reacting to these, the Spanish government sent repeated orders to their Ambassador in London to demand Turnbull's recall. The main charge against Turnbull was inciting Cuba's slaves to revolt, although no supporting evidence was provided to back up this accusation.⁵⁸ Spain even despatched a special envoy to London early in 1841 to urge Palmerston to give the necessary instructions for Turnbull's removal.⁵⁹ Palmerston was adamant in his refusal to act without documentary proof of Turnbull's alleged wrongdoing which the Spanish were unable to supply.

Spain had greater success with Palmerston's successor, Lord Aberdeen, who came into office late in 1841 and who soon grew weary of the endless Spanish complaints. Early in 1842, he decided to separate the two offices of consul and Superintendent of Liberated Africans, leaving Turnbull in charge of the freed African slaves but removing the consulship from him.⁶⁰ Without the official protection he had enjoyed as consul, Turnbull feared for his life in Havana and retreated to the British hulk, *Romney*, until he finally left the island in the summer of 1842. No longer consul and lacking effective power, he still appeared to the Cubans as the high priest of abolitionism plotting their destruction from within his maritime sanctuary. Of all the abolitionists capable of causing an upheaval in Cuba, the Captain-General saw Turnbull as "the most likely and the most frightening".⁶¹

Turnbull's association with Cuba did not end with his departure in the summer of 1842. As consul, he had tried to investigate rumours of free Africans being taken illegally from the Bahamas to Cuba as slaves. He continued this investigation after he left and, prompted by the hope of freeing English slaves, he returned in October, 1842. He chartered a sloop in Nassau and with a small crew of free Africans he landed at a small town near Matanzas. All the Cuban authorities had been warned to be on the lookout for him and he was immediately arrested. Since he no longer held any official position, he was fortunate that his trial resulted only in his permanent expulsion from the island. The Captain-General was under strong pressure from the European population to execute him.⁶² This time Turnbull's departure was permanent, but the legacy he left behind was as powerful an influence as the man himself had been.

Two years later a Cuban military commission, meeting to investigate the origins of what the Cuban government termed the worst slave rebellion in the island's history, concluded that David Turnbull was primarily responsible for the plan of the conspiracy even if he was not in Cuba to lead it.⁶³ Whether or not a slave rebellion actually occurred has been a matter of considerable debate among historians. Whatever the truth about the alleged uprising, it gave the Cuban authorities the excuse they had been looking for to conduct a brutal purge of free blacks and Cuban dissidents.⁶⁴ Turnbull categorically denied all the charges and allegations made against him and the British government supported him in the face of renewed Spanish accusations.

The *Escalera* conspiracy of 1844 is still cloaked with mystery, but it marks the end of an era in which British abolitionists had a notable effect on Cuban history. Throughout the previous decade the climate of fear among the plantocracy and Spanish bureaucracy grew steadily worse until it finally exploded in the repression of 1844. It was present the following year when the Spanish Cortes approved a Penal Law establishing penalties for different categories of slave trade offences. Fear of further slave uprisings, inspired by British abolitionist agents, moved Spain to tackle the problem of the slave trade. The law, however, was emasculated by the insertion of an article designed to prohibit searches for illegal slaves inside plantations, a direct response to the danger the planters perceived in the Turnbull proposal of 1840. The Cuban slave trade, operating under the protection of this article, continued for another twenty years.

The pervasive fear of British abolitionists had other ramifications. Cuban planters no longer had confidence in Spain's ability to preserve their slave property from British machinations and began to think of the United States as a better guarantor. Out of this growing insecurity emerged the annexationist movement of the later 1840's. Reports of British abolitionist plots against Cuba filtered out to the United States and heightened American suspicions of British intentions in Cuba.⁶⁵ British abolitionist designs on Cuba, whether real or not, provided a powerful rationale for United States' efforts to acquire Cuba in the 1840's and 1850's. Within Cuba the slave regime, especially on the rural plantations, became noticeably harsher and its racism became more pronounced. In part this was due to the effect on Cuba's European population of the large numbers of African slaves being brought to Cuba, so many that by 1840 for the first time in Cuba's history the number of slaves exceeded the European population; but it was also a reaction by frightened planters and officials to their own exaggerated nightmares of British abolitionist plots. This emotional and violent reaction helps to explain the introduction of a new and much less liberal slave code in Cuba in 1842, the first since 1789. The Spanish government was trying vainly to calm the aroused planters who were clamouring for harsher measures.⁶⁶

What is particularly ironic about the Cuban reaction to the British abolitionist conspiracy is that no conspiracy existed. The British plot to foment armed rebellion among Cuba's slaves by sending out abolitionist agents was a figment of the plantocracy's imagination. The appearance of individual British abolitionists in Cuba, far from a planned conspiracy was largely fortuitous, but it did coincide with a resurgent British abolitionist movement within Britain and it came after the emancipation of slavery within the British empire. Accidental as this combination of circumstances was, it had explosive potential. The revolution experienced in the British West Indies might easily have spread next door to Cuba. Men like Thompson, Madden and Turnbull did not really appreciate the incendiary power of the idea they carried.

NOTES

¹For a description of the revolutionary impact of abolition on Jamaica, see Philip D. Curtin, *Two Jamaicas, the Role of Ideas in a Tropical Colony, 1830-1865* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), esp. pp. 81-98.

²For details of these treaties, see Arthur F. Corwin, *Spain and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba, 1817-1886* (Austin, 1967), pp. 28-30 & 60-2; and H. H. S. Aimes, *The History of Slavery in Cuba, 1511-1868* (New York, 1967, reprint ed.), pp. 82-4 & 126-7.

³Tacón to Minister of the Interior, no. 121, 31 August 1835, Juan Pérez de la Riva, *Correspondencia reservada del Capitan General Don Miguel Tacón con el gobierno de Madrid, 1834-1836* (Havana, 1963), pp. 177-9.

⁴Exod. 21: 16, "And he that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death."

⁵Minute of a royal order to Tacón, 25 Oct. 1835, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, [hereafter cited as A.H.N.] estado, leg. 8.036.

⁶Tacón to Minister of the Interior, nos. 168 & 170, 30 Jan. & 6 Feb. 1836, A.H.N., ultramar, leg. 4603.

⁷Tacón to Minister of Foreign Affairs, no. 3, reservado, 31 March 1836, Pérez de la Riva, *op. cit.*, pp. 223-7; see also A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.035 and ultramar, leg. 4603 for further documents on Apodaca's mission.

⁸Tacón to Minister of Marine and Colonies, no. 436, 31 Aug., 1837, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.036.

⁹Memorandum by Palmerston, 9 March, on Tolmé to Palmerston, no. 3, 2 Feb., 1838, Public Record Office, London, [hereafter cited as P.R.O.] F.O. 72/513.

¹⁰Tolmé to Palmerston, no. 8, 21 May 1838, P.R.O., F.O. 72/513.

¹¹James Thompson to Rev. A. Bandram, no. 163, 16 Aug. 1837, British and Foreign Bible Society, London, Corres. Inwards, vol. III.

¹²Thompson to Bandram, no. 185, 9 Sept. 1837, *ibid.* I am indebted to Mr. & Mrs. D.A. Barrass of Cambridge, England for these two references.

¹³Tacón to Minister of Marine and Colonies, no. 450, 3 Oct. 1837, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.036.

¹⁴Petition of Havana *Ayuntamiento*, 22 Sept. 1837, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.036.

¹⁵W. R. Manning, *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States, Inter-American Affairs, 1831-1860*, 12 vols. (Washington, 1932-9), vol. XI, Count Ofalia to John Eaton, 22 Feb. 1838, pp. 307-9; Ofalia to Villiers, 22 Feb. 1838, encl. in Villiers to Palmerston, no. 81, 3 March 1838, P.R.O., F.O. 72/502.

¹⁶Manning, *Diplomatic Correspondence*, XI, Eaton to Ofalia, 10 Mar. 1838, pp. 310-13; Villiers to Ofalia, 10 Apr., encl. in Villiers to Palmerston, no. 133, 14 Apr. 1838, P.R.O., F.O. 72/503.

¹⁷Minute on Minister of Marine and Colonies to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 20 Jan. 1838, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.036.

¹⁸The correspondence on Madden's appointment can be found in P.R.O., F.O. 84/208, C.O. to F.O. 12 Jan., 7 Mar. and 2 May 1836; F.O. to C.O., drafts, 27 Jan. and 25 Mar. 1836.

¹⁹Madden's own description of his work in Jamaica can be found in R.R. Madden, *A Twelvemonth's Residence in the West Indies . . .*, 2 vols. (London, 1835)

²⁰Villiers to Istúriz, 27 May, and reply 4 June, encl. in Villiers to Palmerston, nos. 6, 29 May and 10, 12 June 1836, P.R.O., F.O. 84/201.

²¹Tacón to Minister of Foreign Affairs, no. 4, reservado, 31 Aug. 1836, Pérez de la Riva, *op. cit.*, pp. 252-5.

²²*Ibid.* See also Madden to Tacón, 26 Sept. and Tacón to Madden, 9 Oct., encl. in Madden to Palmerston, 28 Sept. and 22 Oct. 1836, P.R.O., F.O. 84/195.

²³Commissioners to Tacón, 26 Oct. and reply, 29 Oct., encl. in commissioners to Palmerston, no. 77, 5 Nov. 1836, P.R.O., F.O. 84/197.

²⁴Palmerston to Villiers, no. 16, draft, 22 Dec. 1836, P.R.O., F.O. 84/201; Almodovar to Villiers, 12 Mar., encl. in Villiers to Palmerston, no. 7, 25 Mar. 1837, P.R.O., F.O. 84/221.

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²⁵Tacón to British commissioners, 26 Aug., encl. in commissioners to Palmerston, no. 51, 23 Sept. 1837, P.R.O., F.O. 84/217; Tacón to Minister of Foreign Affairs, no. 192, 31 Aug. 1837, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.022(2).

²⁶Espeleta to Minister of Foreign Affairs, no. 13, 31 May 1838, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.025(2).

²⁷Richard Kimball, *Cuba and the Cubans* . . . (New York, 1850), p. 71.

²⁸Kennedy to Palmerston, no. 35, 10 Aug. 1838, P.R.O., F.O. 84/240; Palmerston to commissioners, no. 27, draft, 17 Nov. 1838, P.R.O., F.O. 84/239. For the report of the sale of the *Romney*, see commissioners to Aberdeen, no. 62, 18 Dec. 1845, P.R.O., F.O. 84/562.

²⁹Capt.-Gen. Anglona to Minister of Foreign Affairs, no. 13, 31 Mar. 1840, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.025(1). For a British abolitionist view, see David Turnbull, *Travels in the West* . . . (London, 1840), p. 73.

³⁰Fernando Ortiz, *Hampa afro-cubana: los negros esclavos* (Havana, 1916), p. 323.

³¹For recent critical assessments of Cuban abolitionists, see Raul Cepero Bonilla, *Obras* (Havana, 1963), pp. 1-79 and Manuel Moreno Fragnals, *El Ingenio*, t. 1 (Havana, 1964), pp. 143-5.

³²J.A. Saco, "Análisis de una obra el Brasil," *Papeles sobre Cuba* (Havana, 1960), t. 2, pp. 30-90.

³³Saco, *Mi primera pregunta* . . . (Madrid, 1837). This essay was re-published in an expanded version in 1845; see *Papeles sobre Cuba*, t. 2, pp. 90-154. For two Cuban analyses of Saco's ideas, see Fernando Ortiz, "José Antonio Saco y sus ideas," *Revista bimestre cubana* (1929), XXIV, pp. 387-409 and Manuel Moreno Fragnals, "Nación o plantación (el dilema político cubano visto a través de José Antonio Saco)," *Homenaje a S. Zavala* (México, 1953), pp. 243-272.

³⁴The questionnaire can be found in José A. Fernandez Castro, ed., *Domingo del Monte*, Colección de libros cubanos, XII (Havana, 1929), pp. 133-143. Madden's address was published as *Address on Slavery in Cuba presented to the General Anti-Slavery Convention* (London, 1840) and later included in his book, *The Island of Cuba* (London, 1849), pp. 114-156.

³⁵For assessments of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, see Betty Fladeland, *Men and Brothers, Anglo-American Antislavery Co-operation* (Urbana, 1972), pp. 257-273 and Howard Temperley, *British Antislavery, 1833-1870* (1972), pp. 62-92.

³⁶Thomas Fowell Buxton, *The African Slave Trade and its Remedy* (London, 2nd ed. 1840). For assessments of Buxton, see Temperley, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-61 and J. Gallagher, "Fowell Buxton and the New African Policy, 1838-1842," *Cambridge Historical Journal*, X (1950), pp. 36-58.

³⁷David Turnbull, *Travels in the West: Cuba, with notices of Porto Rico and the Slave Trade* (London, 1840).

³⁸The biographical information is taken from Turnbull to Palmerston, 22 Jan. 1841, P.R.O., F.O. 72/584.

³⁹For further details on the courts of mixed commission, see L. M. Bethell, "The mixed commissions for the suppression of the transatlantic slave trade in the nineteenth century," *Journal of African History*, vol. 7 (1966), pp. 79-93.

⁴⁰Turnbull, *Travels in the West*, p. 343.

⁴¹Minute by Palmerston on Turnbull to Palmerston, 28 Feb. 1840, P.R.O., F.O. 84/342.

⁴²Turnbull to Leveson, 9 & 19 Mar. 1840, P.R.O., F.O. 84/342.

⁴³Turnbull to Palmerston, 13 Mar. 1840, P.R.O., F.O. 84/342.

⁴⁴Memorandum by Palmerston, 15 Mar., on Turnbull to Palmerston, 13 Mar. 1840, P.R.O., F.O. 84/342.

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⁴⁵*Morning Chronicle*, 9 Mar. 1840.

⁴⁶[MacGregor Laird], *Westminster Review*, vol. 34 (June, 1840), p. 151.

⁴⁷Palmerston to Aston, no. 13, draft, 25 May 1840, P.R.O., F.O. 84/318.

⁴⁸Historians writing about Turnbull have incorrectly assumed he was. See, for example, Arthur F. Corwin, *Spain and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba, 1817-1886*, p. 75; P. S. Foner, *A History of Cuba and its Relations with the United States*, vol. 1 (New York 1962), p. 201; and Mario Hernández y Sánchez-Barba, "David Turnbull y el problema de la esclavitud en Cuba," *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, vol. XIV (1957), p. 266.

⁴⁹British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society Minute Books, 10 Apr., 25 June 1840, Br. Emp. Mss. S20 E2/6, Rhodes House, Oxford.

⁵⁰Turnbull to Palmerston, 4 July and Turnbull to Tredgold, 25 July, encl. in Tredgold to Palmerston, 25 July 1840, P.R.O., F.O. 84/342.

⁵¹González to Minister of Foreign Affairs, no. 1, 4 Mar. 1841, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.053.

⁵²British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society Minute Books, 31 July 1840, Br. Emp. Mss. S20, E2/6.

⁵³Capt.-Gen. Anglona to Minister of Foreign Affairs, no. 50, 1 Nov. 1840, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.053.

⁵⁴*Junta de Fomento* to Capt.-Gen. Anglona, 18 Nov., encl. in Anglona to Minister of Foreign Affairs, no. 53, 30 Nov. 1840, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.053.

⁵⁵Turnbull to Palmerston, no. 72, 31 Aug. 1841, P.R.O., F.O. 84/358.

⁵⁶Sancho to Aberdeen, 31 Jan. 1842, P.R.O., F.O. 84/400.

⁵⁷Domingo Figarola Cañeda and Joaquín Llaverías y Martínez, eds., *Centón epistolario de Domingo del Monte*, 5 t. (Havana 1923-38), t. 5, Palomino to del Monte, 9 Sept. 1841, pp. 39-41.

⁵⁸Minute of a despatch to Spanish Ambassador, London, 16 Feb. 1841, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.053.

⁵⁹For accounts of this mission, see Alava to Minister of Foreign Affairs, no. 668, 4 Mar. and González to Minister of Foreign Affairs, no. 1, 4 Mar. 1841, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.053.

⁶⁰Aberdeen to Turnbull, draft, 10 Feb. 1842, P.R.O., F.O. 72/608.

⁶¹Capt.-Gen. Valdés to Minister of Foreign Affairs, no. 140, 30 June 1842, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.054.

⁶²For accounts of this incident, see Crawford to Bidwell, no. 38, 5 Nov. 1842, P.R.O., F.O. 84/401 and Crawford to Bidwell, 7 May 1843, P.R.O., F.O. 72/634; Valdés to Minister of Foreign Affairs, nos. 181 & 187, 5 & 30 Nov. 1842, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.054. Turnbull later published his own version, David Turnbull, *The Jamaica Movement . . .* (London, 1850), pp. 221-32.

⁶³"Judgement of the Matanzas section of the Military Commission to investigate the origins of the African conspiracy," 30 June 1844, A.H.N., estado, leg. 8.057.

⁶⁴For different views on the *Escalera* conspiracy, see Vidal Morales y Morales, *Iniciadores y primeros mártires de la revolución cubana*, 3 t., (Havana, 2nd ed. 1963), t. 1, pp. 277-304 and P. S. Foner, *A History of Cuba*, vol. 1, pp. 214-228. Accounts of the brutality can be found in Crawford to Aberdeen, no. 9, 9 Mar., 15 Apr. & no. 26, 7 Aug. 1844, P.R.O., F.O. 84/520 and in Kimball, *Cuba and the Cubans*, pp. 83-92.

⁶⁵Manning, *Diplomatic Correspondence*, XI, Webster to Campbell, 14 Jan. 1843, pp. 26-9; Upshur to Irving, 9 Jan. 1844, pp. 31-2 and Calhoun to Campbell, 26 June 1844, pp. 33-4.

⁶⁶Franklin Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, 1970), pp. 126-132.

