

A Letter of Anthony Benezet

THE following letter, in the *Gurney Loan MSS.* (Sec. I, 50), which has not hitherto been published, is another example of the extensive correspondence which Anthony Benezet (1713-83), the Philadelphia schoolmaster, carried on in his efforts to awaken convictions against slavery.¹ Henry J. Cadbury's paper before the Friends' Historical Society on the *Colonial Quaker Antecedents of the British Abolition of Slavery* (Friends' Quarterly Examiner, 1933) explains a number of the matters alluded to, while fuller information may be obtained from N. Kite's *Brief Statement of the Rise and Progress of the Testimony of . . . Friends against Slavery . . .* Phila., 1843; A. C. Thomas: *Attitude of . . . Friends towards Slavery in the 17th and 18th Centuries . . .*, 1897; and R. M. Jones: *Quakers in the American Colonies*, 1911. The "treatise" the writer refers to is a work entitled *Some Historical Account of Guinea, its Situation, Produce, and the general Disposition of its Inhabitants. With an Inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Slave Trade, its Nature and lamentable Effects . . .* Phila., 1771, reprinted in London. It was Benezet's sixth work against slavery and about twelve years later it powerfully influenced Thomas Clarkson to devote himself to the abolition of slavery.

The recipients of the letter were John Gurney (John's) of Brooke (1718-79) and his brother Henry (1721-77).² These two were the founders of Gurneys Bank in 1775, but at the time of the letter they were leading merchants in Norwich.³

¹ Clarkson: *History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, II, 164 ff., mentions Granville Sharp, George Whitfield, John Wesley, The Countess of Huntingdon, Abbé Raynal, Queen Charlotte.

² They were the two surviving sons of John Gurney (1688-1740), the friend of Sir Robert Walpole, and grandsons of John Gurney, the ancestor of the Quaker Gurneys.

³ The following advertisement of the firm appeared in a local newspaper in 1756.

IRISH LINNENS lately Imported, and now Selling at JOHN and HENRY GURNEY's in Norwich. A large Quantity of all the different Sorts will be disposed of on very reasonable Terms, they are of the best Fabricks and the last New Bleaching. Also some Lancashire Sheeting, and Cheques, stript Cottons, and yellow Canvas, which will be sold very Cheap.

Their wealth and influence would lead Joseph Oxley, a Norwich Friend travelling in the ministry, to name them to Benezet as suitable recipients for some of his persuasive letters and tracts. No immediate response to this letter in the way of anti-slavery influence is recorded.

John Hunt (1740-1824) was an eminent New Jersey ministering Friend. His father was a first cousin of John Woolman. His Journal is printed in Comly's *Miscellany*, X, see also many other references in that series.

ARTHUR J. EDDINGTON.

Anthony Benezet to John and Henry Gurney, Norwich,
England.

Philadelphia—y^e 10th 1st Mo. 1772.

Esteemed Friends

John & Henry Gurney.—

From the encouragement given me by our dear friend Joseph Oxley, who after performing a very acceptable visit to these parts, is returning to you, I take the freedom respectfully to salute you ; & to request some of your attention on a subject which has long been a matter of great concern to many well disposed people in these parts, viz. The Negro Trade ; the purchasing & bringing the miserable Africans from their native land, & subjecting them to a state of perpetual bondage, and that, often, the most cruel & afflictive ; in which our Nation is so deeply engaged.—I herewith send you two copies of a Treatise lately published here on this weighty subject, wherein is truly set forth the inhumanity & great wickedness, whereby so many hundred thousands of our Fellow Men, equally with us the Objects of Redeeming Grace, indowed with the same mental powers, & as free as ourselves by nature, have been, & yet are brought to a miserable and untimely end.—I entreat you will give it a serious perusal, when, I am persuaded, you will be sensible, it is a matter which calls for the most deep consideration, of all who are concerned for the civil, as well as Religious Welfare of their Country, & desirous to avert those judgments, which evils of so deep a dye, must necessarily, sooner or later, bring upon every people who are defiled therewith.—I have but small expectation of the

service this publication may be of ; considering the selfishness which so much prevails amongst all orders of men ; but, however, I shall have the satisfaction of having done what I could, to set this weighty matter in a true point of view.—

I have wondered at the strange capriciousness of the human heart, that even thinking men should be so solicitous in procuring to themselves, not only all that is necessary, but also all that is comfortable, & many rather wasting the substance they have gathered in procuring all that their souls delight in, & still under a high profession of Christianity, the basis of which is, the Love of God,—& that which the lip of Truth declares to be equal thereto, “ That we love our Neighbour, (i.e. all Mankind) equal to ourselves.”—And yet how unfeeling for the sufferings of others, how languid in our endeavours for their relief.—If this love indeed prevailed, could it otherwise than deeply affect the many high professors, of different denominations, who have had opportunity to be acquainted, not only with the grievous sufferings and prodigious destruction which is, thro’ this trade, made of the human species, by means the most disgraceful, afflictive and cruel ; but also with its woeful effects on their immediate oppressors, the people of the West India Islands & our most Southern Provinces, in vitiating their judgments, corrupting their morals, & hardening their hearts, & the hearts of their offspring, till they become alienated from God, estranged from all good, & hastening to a state of greater, far greater, more deeply corrupt, barbarity, than that from whence our Northern Progenitors emerged, before their acquaintance with Christianity.—

Can we be innocent & yet silent spectators of this mighty infringement of every humane and sacred right ?—Is it not the duty of every one who knows these things, to do all in their power, in imitation of the good Bishop of Chapia, mentioned in the Treatise, page 48,—to bring this matter before the King & Parliament ? Will any thing short of this excuse us to God, the common Father of Mankind, when inquisition is made for the blood of so many thousands & tens of thousands of our fellow men, (i.e. our Neighbours), so unjustly, and so cruelly shed, & yet daily shedding by our Nation ; more especially as this evil is maintained under the

sanction of Laws, made by our Representatives in Parliament.—Indeed the assertion made at page 86 seems to be verified by experience, viz.—“that the Slavery of the Negroes in our Colonies, is attended with far worse circumstances, than what any people, in their condition suffer, in any part of the world, or have suffered in any other period of time”, for even wicked, amazingly wicked, as are the American Laws, quoted at page 81 & 26—Yet that part intended for the security of the Slaves, is but seldom put in execution on sundry accounts, viz.—Because a Slave’s evidence is not valid; therefore the prosecution of the Murderer, must generally lay on the White Overseers testimony, who, except in resentment, will not be likely to appear against his employer; and because it is dangerous in most places where Slavery prevails, to appear on behalf of Negroes, so that it is not uncommon to hear shocking instances of the Negroes being wantonly, passionately, or cruelly murdered, without any legal notice, being taken of it; not to mention the many aged and infirm, who, of course, languish disregarded, and fall victims to that hardheartedness which prevails with the practice of Slave-keeping.—If the blood of one Man called for vengeance, &c &c—We as a people have not been backward in applying to Parliament, in cases where our sufferings have been by no means comparable to the present case.—If Friends would take any step tending to prevent the continuance of the Slave Trade, if not of Slavery itself, we should have the unity of many upright people of other religious Persuasions;—indeed the people of Maryland and Virginia are so convinced of the inexpediency, if not, all, of the iniquity of any farther importation of Negroes, that our friend John Hunt, who has spent some time in those parts, tells me he thinks ten or twenty thousand people would join in a petition to that purpose, to the Parliament. But are we not, as a Society, in a situation somewhat similar to that mentioned Esther Chapr. 4th.—May *We* altogether hold our peace? Who Knoweth if we are not intended for such a service as this.—And What judgments may fall on us (on account of our unfeeling & unbelieving hearts) when deliverance ariseth another way?

If some extracts of what had already appear’d could, with proper amendments and remarks, be periodically

published in some of your publick prints, might it not, through divine blessing, be the most likely means to make way for bringing this most interesting consideration under the notice of those, in whose power it is to procure a remedy ; particularly as you would not be under the fear we are in of saying that which may be construed as making the Negroes acquainted with their own strength, & terrify the People.—

The last Yearly Meeting of Friends in Maryland have drawn up a petition to be laid before their Assembly, praying for a Law to prevent any farther importation of Negroes ; and I understand Friends of the Yearly Meetg. of Virginia had the same under their consideration.—The Assembly of New England have made laws, with respect to the importation of Negroes, that amount to a prohibition, and have proposed that, those born in the country should be free, at a certain age.—

By a late computation there is about eight hundred and fifty thousand Negroes in the English Colonies and Islands.—In Jamaica alone, I am credibly informed, on a Review of taxables, not long since made, there was about two hundred thousand Negro Slaves ; & not many, if any more than fifteen thousand Whites ; and the Trade still carried on with such vigour that we have reason to conclude there are still yearly an hundred thousand violently brought from Africa, by the English alone : many of these last are by the Jamaica traders sold to the Spaniards.—

I shall now refer you to the Treatise, requesting your charitable construction of the liberty I have taken in thus addressing myself to you, being a stranger, but I trust the importance of the subject will plead my excuse.—And with affectionate regard remain your friend

Anthony Benezet.