

JOHN BRIGHT

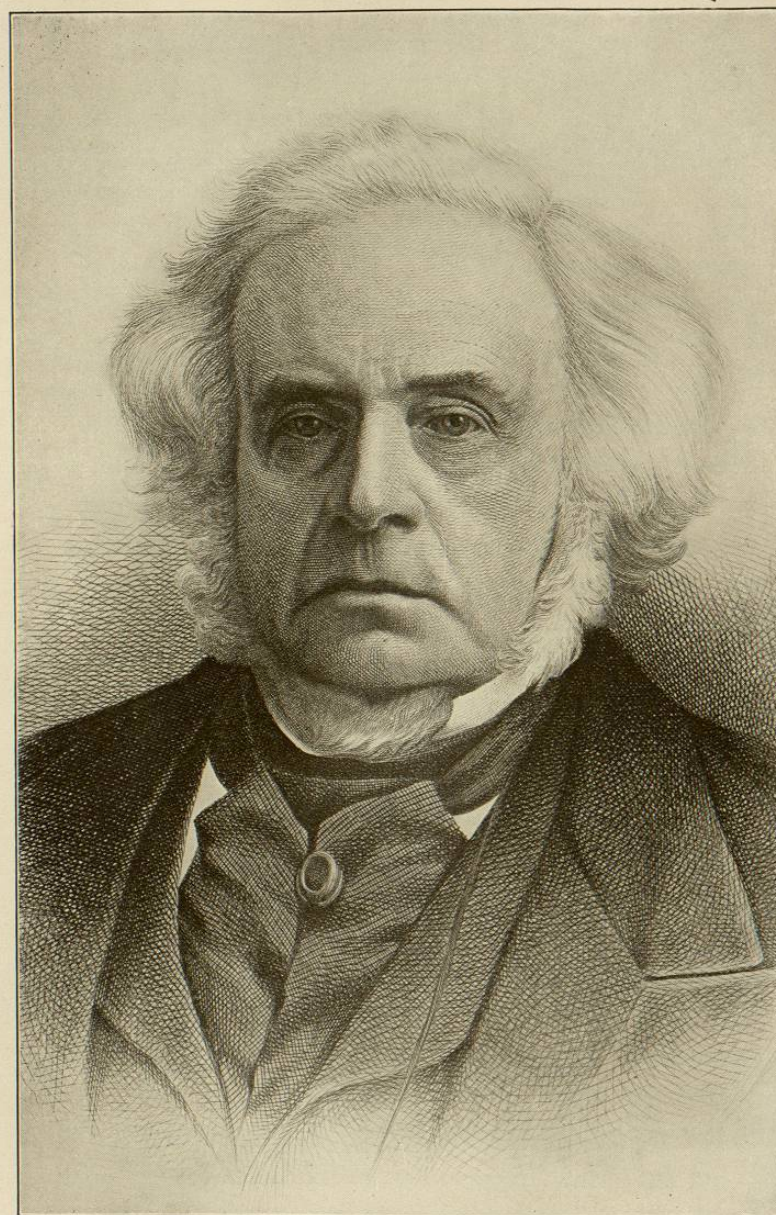
THE RIGHT HON. JOHN BRIGHT, eminent English statesman, Liberal, and orator, son of a Quaker cotton-spinner, was born near Rochdale, Lancashire, Nov. 16, 1811, and died there March 27, 1889. Being a Dissenter, he was educated at a private school, and was debarred from entering any of the universities. From the moment that he entered Parliament in 1843, he coöperated heartily with Richard Cobden and Charles Villiers in the furtherance of the movement for the repeal of the Corn Laws, which was to triumph after it had made a convert of Sir Robert Peel. His opposition to the Crimean War caused him, in 1857, to lose the seat which he had held for a Manchester constituency, but he was presently returned for Birmingham, and remained in Parliament upwards of thirty years. Throughout his parliamentary career he was an earnest pleader for justice to Ireland, an opponent of protection and advocate of parliamentary reform, and zealous for the perpetuation of amicable relations between England and the United States. After holding office repeatedly under Liberal prime ministers, among other posts holding that of Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, he broke with Gladstone in 1886 on the question of Home Rule, though in favor of ameliorative measures for Ireland. John Bright was, on the whole, the most graceful, finished, and persuasive speaker among the public men of his day in England; and his speeches are probably still read with more pleasure than are those of any other contemporary English orator. The most potent influence of Bright on his time was on the side of national righteousness and peace.

THE "TRENT" AFFAIR¹

ROCHDALE, DECEMBER 4, 1861

WHEN the gentlemen who invited me to this dinner called upon me, I felt their kindness very sensibly, and now I am deeply grateful to my friends around me, and to you all, for the abundant manifestations of kindness with which I have been received to-night. I

¹During the excitement caused by the seizure of Messrs. Mason and Slidell, the envoys of the Slaveholders' Confederation, on board the "Trent" steamer, Mr. Bright's townsmen invited him to a public banquet, that they might have the opportunity of hearing his opinions on the American Civil War, and on the duty of England in regard to it.



JOHN BRIGHT

am, as you all know, surrounded at this moment by my neighbors and friends, and I may say with the utmost truth, that I value the good opinions of those who now hear my voice far beyond the opinions of any equal number of the inhabitants of this country selected from any other portion of it. You have, by this act of kindness that you have shown me, given proof that, in the main, you do not disapprove of my course and labors, that at least you are willing to express an opinion that the motives by which I have been actuated have been honest and honorable to myself, and that that course has not been entirely without service to my country. Coming to this meeting, or to any similar meeting, I always find that the subjects for discussion appear too many, and far more than it is possible to treat at length. In these times in which we live, by the influence of the telegraph, and the steamboat and the railroad, and the multiplication of newspapers, we seem continually to stand as on the top of an exceeding high mountain, from which we behold all the kingdoms of the earth and all the glory of them—unhappily, also, not only their glory, but their follies, and their crimes, and their calamities.

Seven years ago, our eyes were turned with anxious expectation to a remote corner of Europe, where five nations were contending in bloody strife for an object which possibly hardly one of them comprehended, and, if they did comprehend it, which all sensible men among them must have known to be absolutely impracticable. Four years ago, we were looking still further to the East, where there was a gigantic revolt in a great dependency of the British crown, arising mainly from gross neglect, and from the incapacity of England, up to that moment, to govern the country which it had known how to conquer. Two years

ago we looked south, to the plains of Lombardy, and saw a great strife there, in which every man in England took a strong interest; and we have welcomed, as the result of that strife, the addition of a great kingdom to the list of European States. Now our eyes are turned in a contrary direction, and we look to the west. There we see a struggle in progress of the very highest interest to England and to humanity at large. We see there a nation which I shall call the Transatlantic English nation—the inheritor and partaker of all the historic glories of this country. We see it torn with intestine broils, and suffering from calamities from which for more than a century past—in fact, for more than two centuries past—this country has been exempt. That struggle is of especial interest to us. We remember the description which one of our great poets gives of Rome—

“Lone mother of dead empires.”

But England is the living mother of great nations on the American and on the Australian continents, which promise to endow the world with all her knowledge and all her civilization, and with even something more than the freedom she herself enjoys.

Eighty-five years ago, at the time when some of our oldest townsmen were very little children, there were, on the North American continent, colonies, mainly of Englishmen, containing about three millions of souls. These colonies we have seen a year ago constituting the United States of North America, and comprising a population of no less than thirty millions of souls. We know that in agriculture and manufactures, with the exception of this kingdom, there is no country in the world which in these arts may be placed in

advance of the United States. With regard to inventions, I believe, within the last thirty years, we have received more useful inventions from the United States than from all the other countries of the earth. In that country there are probably ten times as many miles of telegraph as there are in this country, and there are at least five or six times as many miles of railway. The tonnage of its shipping is at least equal to ours, if it does not exceed ours. The prisons of that country—for, even in countries the most favored, prisons are needful—have been models for other nations of the earth; and many European governments have sent missions at different times to inquire into the admirable system of education so universally adopted in their free schools throughout the Northern States.

If I were to speak of that country in a religious aspect, I should say that, considering the short space of time to which their history goes back, there is nothing on the face of the earth besides, and never has been, to equal the magnificent arrangement of churches and ministers, and of all the appliances which are thought necessary for a nation to teach Christianity and morality to its people. Besides all this, when I state that, for many years past, the annual public expenditure of the government of that country has been somewhere between £10,000,000 and £15,000,000, I need not perhaps say further that there has always existed among all the population an amount of comfort and prosperity and abounding plenty such as I believe no other country in the world, in any age, has enjoyed.

This is a very fine, but a very true picture; yet it has another side to which I must advert. There has been one great feature in that country, one great contrast, which has been pointed to by all who have commented upon the

United States as a feature of danger, as a contrast calculated to give pain. There has been in that country the utmost liberty to the white man, and bondage and degradation to the black man. Now rely upon it, that wherever Christianity lives and flourishes, there must grow up from it, necessarily, a conscience hostile to any oppression and to any wrong; and therefore, from the hour when the United States Constitution was formed, so long as it left there this great evil—then comparatively small, but now so great—it left there seeds of that which an American statesman has so happily described of that “irrepressible conflict” of which now the whole world is the witness. It has been a common thing for men disposed to carp at the United States to point to this blot upon their fair fame, and to compare it with the boasted declaration of freedom in their Deed and Declaration of Independence. But we must recollect who sowed this seed of trouble, and how and by whom it has been cherished.

Without dwelling upon this stain any longer, I should like to read to you a paragraph from the instructions understood to have been given to the Virginian delegates to Congress, in the month of August, 1774, by Mr. Jefferson, who was perhaps the ablest man the United States had produced up to that time, and who was then actively engaged in its affairs, and who afterward for two periods filled the office of President. He represented one of these very slave States—the State of Virginia—and he says:

“For the most trifling reasons, and sometimes for no conceivable reason at all, his Majesty has rejected laws of the most salutary tendency. The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state.

But previous to the enfranchisement of the slaves we have, it is necessary to exclude all further importations from Africa. Yet our repeated attempts to effect this by prohibition, and by imposing duties which might amount to prohibition, have hitherto been defeated by his Majesty’s negative—thus preferring the immediate advantages of a few British corsairs to the lasting interests of the American States, and to the rights of human nature, deeply wounded by this infamous practice.”

I read this merely to show that, two years before the Declaration of Independence was signed, Mr. Jefferson, acting on behalf of those he represented in Virginia, wrote that protest against the course of the English Government which prevented the colonists from abolishing the slave trade, preparatory to the abolition of slavery itself.

Well, the United States Constitution left the slave question for every State to manage for itself. It was a question too difficult to settle then, and apparently every man had the hope and belief that in a few years slavery itself would become extinct. Then there happened a great event in the annals of manufactures and commerce. It was discovered that in those States that article which we in this country now so much depend on, could be produced of the best quality necessary for manufacture, and at a moderate price. From that day to this the growth of cotton has increased there, and its consumption has increased here, and a value which no man dreamed of when Jefferson wrote that paper has been given to the slave and to slave industry. Thus it has grown up to that gigantic institution which now threatens either its own overthrow or the overthrow of that which is a million times more valuable—the United States of America.

The crisis at which we have arrived—I say “we,” for, after all, we are nearly as much interested as if I was making this speech in the city of Boston or the city of New York—the crisis, I say, which has now arrived, was inevitable. I say that the conscience of the North, never satisfied with the institution of slavery, was constantly urging some men forward to take a more extreme view of the question; and there grew up naturally a section—it may not have been a very numerous one—in favor of the abolition of slavery. A great and powerful party resolved at least upon a restraint and a control of slavery, so that it should not extend beyond the States and the area which it now occupies. But, if we look at the government of the United States almost ever since the formation of the Union, we shall find the Southern power has been mostly dominant there. If we take thirty-six years after the formation of the present Constitution—I think about 1787—we shall find that for thirty-two of those years every President was a Southern man; and if we take the period from 1828 until 1860, we shall find that, on every election for President, the South voted in the majority.

We know what an election is in the United States for President of the Republic. There is a most extensive suffrage, and there is the ballot-box. The members of the House of Representatives are elected by the same suffrage, and generally they are elected at the same time. It is thus therefore almost inevitable that the House of Representatives is in accord in public policy with the President for the time being. Every four years there springs from the vote created by the whole people a President over that great nation. I think the world offers no finer spectacle than this; it offers no higher dignity; and there is no

greater object of ambition on the political stage on which men are permitted to move. You may point, if you will, to hereditary rulers, to crowns coming down through successive generations of the same family, to thrones based on prescription or on conquest, to sceptres wielded over veteran legions and subject realms—but to my mind there is nothing more worthy of reverence and obedience, and nothing more sacred, than the authority of the freely chosen magistrate of a great and free people; and if there be on earth and among men any right divine to govern, surely it rests with a ruler so chosen and so appointed.

Last year the ceremony of this great election was gone through, and the South, which had been so long successful, found itself defeated. That defeat was followed instantly by secession, and insurrection, and war. In the multitude of articles which have been before us in the newspapers within the last few months, I have no doubt you have seen it stated, as I have seen it, that this question was very much like that upon which the colonies originally revolted against the crown of England. It is amazing how little some newspaper writers know, or how little they think you know. When the War of Independence was begun in America, ninety years ago, there were no representatives there at all. The question then was, whether a Ministry in Downing Street, and a corrupt and borough-mongering Parliament, should continue to impose taxes upon three millions of English subjects who had left their native shores and established themselves in North America. But now the question is not the want of representation, because, as is perfectly notorious, the South is not only represented, but is represented in excess; for, in distributing the number of representatives, which is done

every ten years, three out of every five slaves are counted as freemen, and the number of representatives from the Slave States is consequently so much greater than if the freemen, the white men only, were counted. From this cause the Southern States have twenty members more in the House of Representatives than they would have if the members were apportioned on the same principle as in the Northern Free States. Therefore you will see at once that there is no comparison between the state of things when the colonies revolted, and the state of things now, when this wicked insurrection has broken out.

There is another cause which is sometimes in England assigned for this great misfortune, which is, the protective theories in operation in the Union, and the maintenance of a high tariff. It happens with regard to that, unfortunately, that no American, certainly no one I ever met with, attributed the disasters of the Union to that cause. It is an argument made use of by ignorant Englishmen, but never by informed Americans. I have already shown you that the South, during almost the whole existence of the Union, has been dominant at Washington; and during that period the tariff has existed, and there has been no general dissatisfaction with it. Occasionally, there can be no doubt, their tariff was higher than was thought just, or reasonable, or necessary by some of the States of the South. But the first act of the United States which levied duties upon imports, passed immediately after the Union was formed, recited that "It is necessary for the encouragement and protection of manufactures to levy the duties which follow"; and during the war with England from 1812 to 1815, the people of the United States had to pay for all the articles they brought from Europe many times

over the natural cost of those articles, on account of the interruption to the traffic by the English nation.

When the war was over, it was felt by everybody desirable that they should encourage manufactures in their own country; and seeing that England at that precise moment was passing a law to prevent any wheat coming from America until wheat in England had risen to the price of 84s. per quarter, we may be quite satisfied that the doctrine of protection originally entertained did not find less favor at the close of the war in 1815.

There is one remarkable point with regard to this matter which should not be forgotten. Twelve months ago, at the meeting of the Congress of the United States, on the first Monday in December, when the Congress met, you recollect that there were various propositions of compromise, committee meetings of various kinds to try and devise some mode of settling the question between the North and the South, so that disunion might not go on—though I read carefully everything published in the English papers from the United States on the subject, I do not recollect that in a single instance the question of the tariff was referred to, or any change proposed or suggested in the matter as likely to have any effect whatever upon the question of Secession.

There is another point—whatever might be the influence of the tariff upon the United States, it is as pernicious to the West as it is to the South; and further, that Louisiana, which is a Southern State and a seceded State, has always voted along with Pennsylvania until last year in favor of protection—protection for its sugar—while Pennsylvania wished protection for its coal and iron. But if the tariff was onerous and grievous, was that any reason for this great insurrection? Was there ever a country that had