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OBSERVATIONS ON MR. MILL'S "HISTORY OF BRITISH INDIA."

PREFATORY REMARKS.

THE following observations are offered with the view of obviating, in some measure, the serious mischief which Mr. Mill's History of British India is calculated to occasion. No one who has read that extraordinary performance can hesitate to admit, that its tendency is to lower the East-India Company in the eyes of the whole civilized world. Mr. Mill has, indeed, in one or two instances, eulogized the Company in regard to their *intentions* towards the people of India, but these praises can have no other effect than that of exciting a smile by their outrageous contradiction to the inferences forced upon the reader by the general tenour of the History. In spite of these eulogies, the following are the impressions which the work has an inevitable tendency to produce:—that the Company owe their origin, as a mercantile body, to an odious and impolitic spirit of monopoly; that their existence in that capacity has occasioned, and still occasions, a heavy loss to the nation in a commercial point of view; that in their territorial and political character, most of the measures by which they have acquired the great British empire in the East, are of a nature which is calculated to reflect disgrace upon the British name; whilst in the government of that empire, the whole of their policy, foreign and domestic, displays marks of the grossest injustice, ignorance, and folly, and has now placed the people of India in a worse situation than that in which they were before their subjection to British sway. No reader of Mr. Mill's history will dispute the truth of the character here given of its nature and tendency; and it will moreover be abundantly established by the succeeding extracts.

That the work is adapted to produce extensive mischief is evident from the following considerations. It happens, unfortunately, to be the only general history of British India in existence, and it is read, consequently, by every one who wishes to acquire that political knowledge of our Indian possessions, which no work except a general history is able to convey; and as it displays throughout marks of extensive learning and laborious research, the reader finds a difficulty in believing, that an author who manifests such uncommon industry in the collection of his facts, can err very far in his inferences: the delusion being strengthened by the invariable tone of self-confidence in which all the arguments are delivered. To these causes we must consider it to be owing, that the work, though composed in a style repulsive, and in some parts offensive, has passed through several editions in England, and has already been translated into a foreign language. It would be trifling with the time of the reader to use arguments to prove, that, under these circumstances, the errors contained in this History must produce the worst effects on the public mind in England, in young men going out in the civil or military service of the East-India Company, and likewise in the minds of the natives of the British possessions in the East.

The only efficacious method of counteracting the evils arising from Mr. Mill's work, would be to compile another entire history of British India; but there is reason to think that much good may be effected by pointing out some among the numerous errors he has committed both in his facts and in his reasonings. The exposure of these errors will certainly tend to diminish his general authority as a writer; it will prove him not to be that historical and political oracle which he imagines himself to be, and which, there is reason to believe, he

he is considered by many others; and in this manner it will counteract much of the mischief, until the appearance of a more just and candid history may entirely supersede the necessity of referring to the pages of Mr. Mill.

That a history of this nature may soon be given to the world is most anxiously to be wished; and the author of the following observations cannot avoid flattering himself, that they may possibly hasten the appearance of so desirable and important an accession to the literature of Britain.

OBSERVATIONS ON Book 1ST.

(From 1527 to 1707.)

In the first book of Mr. Mill's History, the fact most worthy of notice is, that throughout the period it embraces, it represents the East-India Company in the light of a body of men maintaining themselves in the enjoyment of an impolitic and unjust monopoly by unjust and frequently atrocious measures. In his observations on this book, the writer will first endeavour to shew that the character which it affixes to the general conduct of the Company is a gross calumny; and then point out several other errors committed by Mr. Mill both in his facts and reasonings.

Near the commencement of the book it is stated, that the injury sustained by the Company, in the trading license granted by James I. to Sir Edward Michelborne in 1604, was compensated in 1609, "when the facility and indiscretion of King James encouraged the Company to aim at a removal of those restrictions which the more cautious policy of Elizabeth had imposed."* A little farther on they are censured for following the example of all other exclusive companies, in treating "every proposal for a participation in their traffic as a proposal for their ruin."† In chapter 3d, speaking of the license to trade given by Charles I. in 1634 to Sir William Courten, Mr. Mill tells us that "the inability early and constantly displayed by the Company to sustain even the slightest competition is a symptom of inherent infirmities."‡ In the succeeding chapter, the success of the Company in obtaining a renewal of their charter in 1661 is sarcastically ascribed to the "predilection of Charles II. and his ministers for easy rules of government."§ Shortly afterwards we are told, that "the Company were again threatened (1683) by that competition with their fellow citizens which they have always regarded as their greatest misfortune."|| Towards the middle of the fifth chapter, they are represented as struggling against "the principles of liberty, now better understood, and actuating more strongly the minds of Englishmen;"¶ and a few pages farther, in relating the application made to the legislature by the association of merchants, which afterwards became the English Company, Mr. Mill thus expresses himself: "The new associators, though thus strong against the particular pleas of their opponents, were debarred the use of those important arguments which bore upon the principle of exclusion; and which, even in that age, were urged with great force against the Company. They, who were themselves endeavouring to obtain a monopoly, could not proclaim the evils which it was the nature of monopoly to produce."**

Whilst Mr. Mill thus speaks of the exclusive privileges possessed by the Company, he represents many of the measures, which they adopted for the preservation of those privileges, as acts of a most criminal nature. It is in this light; especially, that he endeavours to place the following proceedings: the obtaining power from the Crown in 1624 to try their servants in India by martial

* Page 25. † Page 37. ‡ Page 61. § Page 82. ¶ Page 100. || Page 110. ** Page 120.

In order to perceive the extreme injustice of attempting to bring odium on
the Company's exclusive privileges, we have to attend to the following considera-
tions :

The Company was instituted for the purpose of carrying on trade with a
distant and almost unknown country, and in opposition to the pretensions of
Spain, at that time the most powerful empire in Europe, which claimed the
right of an exclusive commerce with the East-Indies, and which, by the pos-
session of considerable territories with forts and harbours in different parts of
Asia, seemed capable of rendering every attempt by other nations to navigate
the Indian ocean an undertaking of no small difficulty and danger. Five years
before the establishment of the Company, the Dutch had commenced a trade
with the East, and they soon evinced their intention to follow the example of
the Portuguese, by occupying harbours and building forts in those parts with
which they established an intercourse; and whilst the English were prohibited
by the Portuguese from trading with one quarter of India, they soon received
a similar prohibition from the Dutch in regard to another.

The general nature of the competition which the Company had to sustain
in the East, during the first century of their history, cannot be better shewn
than by the following extracts from Mr. Mill's History :

The rivalship between the East-India Company and the other nations of Europe
includes, for a considerable time, the principal incidents of their history. The Portu-
guese, on the pretence of discovery, had long maintained an exclusive claim to the
passage by the Cape of Good Hope: they had, partly by conquest, partly by agree-
ment, made themselves masters of Goa, Bombay, and other places on the Malabar
coast; of Aden, at the entrance of the Red Sea; of Ormus, in the Persian Gulf; of
part of the Malay coast, in the Straits of Malacca; of the Molucca islands, and of the
coasts of Ceylon, the most valuable of all the Eastern islands; they were possessed of
factories in Bengal and in Siam; and they had erected Macao on the coast of China.§
At the time when the Dutch commenced their voyages to the East, the crown of Spain
was engaged in enterprizes of so much importance in other quarters, and so much
engrossed with the contemplation of its splendid empire in the New World, that the
acquisitions, in the East-Indies, of the Portuguese, now become its subjects, were
treated with comparative neglect. The Dutch, accordingly, who entered upon the
trade with India with considerable resources and the utmost ardour, were enabled to
supplant the Portuguese in the spice trade, and, after a struggle, to expel them from
the Molucca islands.|| While the want of funds almost annihilated the operations of
the Company's agents in every part of India; and while they complained that the com-
petition of the ships of the merchant adventurers rendered it, as usual, impracticable
for them to trade with a profit in the markets of India; the Dutch pursued their ad-
vantages against the Portuguese. They had acquired possession of the island of
Ceylon, and in the year 1656-57, blockaded the port of Goa; after which they medi-
tated an attack upon the small island of Diu, which commanded the entrance into the
harbour of Swally. From the success of these plans they expected a complete com-
mand of the navigation on that side of India, and the power of imposing on the English
trade duties under which it would be unable to stand.¶

Such is the view given by Mr. Mill himself of the opposition which the
Company experienced from the Portuguese and Dutch; and when we reflect,
moreover, on the sanguinary contests in which they were, as a necessary con-
sequence,

* Page 52. † Page 102. ‡ See chiefly pp. 88, 111, 112. § Page 35. || Page 36. ¶ Page 78.

sequence, frequently engaged with those two nations, we see clearly that the competition to be sustained was no less of a warlike than a mercantile character. It is upon this ground that their claim to exclusive privileges is completely justified. In order to continue their commerce with India, it was necessary for them to obtain, not only the usual gains upon commercial capital, but so much additional profit as to enable them to bear the expence which a state of hostility rendered unavoidable. Their adversaries having acquired territory, and established forts as well as factories in different parts of India, the Company, for their own preservation, were forced to follow that example; and all they had to enable them to meet the expense of this necessary course of policy were the profits which an exclusive trade alone could realize. Mr. Mill, indeed, endeavours to point out a way in which Great Britain might have continued her commerce with the East without bestowing exclusive privileges on any particular association. He observes that, "as to warlike competition, a few ships of war, with a few companies of marines, employed by the government, would have yielded far more security than all the efforts which a feeble joint stock could make."* The observation betrays a remarkable ignorance of, or inattention to, this fact—namely, that without forts, harbours, and naval stations, such as had been occupied by the Portuguese and Dutch, a fleet of men-of-war sent to the Indian ocean could have been of little or no service. But, be this as it may, the government, it is certain, did not think proper to take upon itself the protection of the Company's trade in the East. Under those circumstances, therefore, that body were entitled to the exclusive privileges by which alone their commerce could be preserved from destruction.

We shall now see that Mr. Mill, in endeavouring to stamp an odious character on the Company's monopoly, has not more sinned against justice than in the manner he has thought proper to speak of the principal measures by which they sought to secure the enjoyment of their chartered rights.

Of the petition presented by the Company to the crown in 1624, for power to try their servants abroad by martial law, Mr. Mill speaks in the following severe terms:—"It appears not that any difficulty was experienced in obtaining their request, or that any parliamentary proceeding for transferring unlimited power over the lives and fortunes of the citizens was deemed a necessary ceremony." The first thing, which strikes our attention in reference to this point, is, that throughout the period of eighty-four years comprehended between 1624 and the year with which the first book terminates, no mention is made of a single instance in which this power of martial law was abused. In several cases the power of martial law was exercised, and all these serve to shew the expediency, or rather the necessity, of vesting the Company with the power in question; but not one instance is mentioned of this power being abused. This consideration must alone be sufficient to prove that, on the score of humanity, it was no objectionable measure on the part of the Company to procure the right of exercising martial law.

With regard to the powers of admiralty jurisdiction obtained by the Company in 1683, the language of Mr. Mill is marked with the utmost asperity. "The Company," he observes, "not satisfied with the power which they had already obtained of common and martial law, and of seizing, with their property, and sending to England as many of their countrymen as their interests or caprice might direct, still called for a wider range of authority; and under the favour of government, which they now enjoyed, obtained the powers of admiralty

* Page 75.

admiralty jurisdiction for the purpose of seizing and condemning, safe from the review of the courts of municipal law in England, the ships of the interlopers."* Speaking of the exercise by the Company of these powers of admiralty jurisdiction, Mr. Mill observes, that that body "proceeded, in a spirit of virulence, to extinguish the hated competition of the general traders;" and, he adds, that the "cruelty which marked their proceedings would be hardly credible, if it were less strongly attested."† After all this, a reader is prepared to expect a long series of atrocities committed by the Company against the interlopers; but he finds, to his astonishment, that nothing farther is alleged than that they seized and imprisoned, or sent home, a certain number of individuals whose appearance on the Indian ocean of itself violated both the rights of the Company and the laws of England. The most ample justification, however, of the Company's conduct may be found in Mr. Mill's own words. Speaking of the period with which we are engaged, he says :

As the science and art of government were still so imperfect as to be very unequal to the suppression of crime, and robberies and murders were prevalent even in the best regulated countries in Europe; so depredation was committed on the ocean under still less restraint, and pirates abounded, wherever the amount of property at sea afforded an adequate temptation. The fame of Indian riches attracted to the Indian seas adventurers of all nations, some of whom were professed pirates; others, men preferring honest trade, though, when they found themselves debarred from this source of profit by the pretensions and of power monopoly, they had no such aversion to piracy as to reject the only other source of which they were allowed to partake. The moderation which, during some few years, the Company had found it prudent to observe in their operations for restraining the resort of private traders to India, had permitted the increase of the predatory adventurers. As vessels belonging to Mogul subjects fell occasionally into the hands of plunderers of the English nation, the Mogul government, too ignorant and headlong to be guided by any but the rudest appearances, held the Company responsible for the deeds of their countrymen; and sometimes proceeded to such extremities as to confiscate their goods and confine their servants.

Is it not almost incredible that the same person who could write thus should apply the epithet of "cruel" to such measures as the seizing and sending to England individuals whose appearance alone on the Indian ocean amounted to a violation of the rights of the Company, and of the laws of their country? Under any circumstances the Company would have been justified in endeavouring to suppress the contraband trade in question, but most especially when it subjected them to the plunder, confiscation, and other evils, which Mr. Mill describes to have been, in a great measure, the consequence of the resort of the interlopers to the Indian ocean; and in maintaining a contrary opinion, after the facts he himself relates, he is evidently guilty of an inconsistency which may be regarded as astonishing.

With respect to the proceedings of the Company against particular interlopers, Mr. Mill is able to mention only a single case in the first century of their history, in which the justice of their conduct can be considered in the least doubtful; and in this it is nothing more than doubtful. The case is that of Skinner, memorable from the contest to which it gave rise between the two houses of Parliament. The government of Oliver Cromwell had granted permission to private traders to carry on commerce with the East; but this licence was withdrawn in 1657, and in the following year the Company caused the ship and merchandize of Skinner in India to be seized. Skinner averred that he had fitted out his adventure before the licence for private trade was withdrawn;

* Page 102.

† Pages 111 and 112.

withdrawn; the Company maintained that he had commenced his voyage after the revocation of the license; and to this day it is doubtful which party was in the right; at least the matter is left totally uncertain by Macpherson, the only authority that Mr. Mill has quoted upon the subject. Skinner carried his case at once to the House of Lords: and the Company having appealed to the Commons against the right of the Upper House to take cognizance of a case which did not come before it by appeal from an inferior court, a violent dispute took place between the two branches of the Legislature, in the course of which Skinner was committed to prison by the Commons, whilst the Governor, Deputy Governor, and two other directors of the Company, received the same severe treatment from the Upper House. The dispute reached so great a height, that the King, after adjourning the two houses no less than seven times, finally prevailed on them to erase all the votes and resolutions upon the subject from their journals;* and Skinner received no award of damages against the Company. In the account of this case, while Mr. Mill takes care to relate, very feelingly, that Skinner was committed to prison by the Commons, he omits all mention of the Upper House having exercised the same severity against the principal officers of the Company;† and, in conclusion, although Macpherson, the sole authority he quotes, leaves it a matter of total uncertainty whether Skinner was entitled to any compensation for his losses, Mr. Mill thus expresses himself:‡—“A contest, of which both parties (Lords and Commons) were tired; being thus ended, the sacrifice and ruin of an individual appeared, as usual, of little importance. Skinner had no redress.” The whole account may be dismissed with the single remark, that it forms a fair specimen of the spirit in which the history appears to have been written throughout.

Having endeavoured to expose the principal fault in Mr. Mill's first Book—namely, the calumnious spirit in which it speaks of the Company's exclusive privileges, and of the measures by which they guarded their rights, the writer will briefly notice several other errors which it discovers; beginning with one which partakes of the leading defect just mentioned.

Speaking with the most philosophic coolness of the massacre of Amboyna, Mr. Mill remarks, that although the sufferers in that dreadful atrocity were innocent of the crime imputed to them, there is no reason to think that the Dutch did not feel fully persuaded of their guilt. His ground for this opinion is the impossibility of suspecting that men reared in European society, and professing the Christian religion, should cruelly put to death so many human beings whom they knew to be innocent. It is gratifying to observe a person, possessed of so *profound* a knowledge of mankind as is displayed in Mr. Mill's writings, reluctant to believe that the massacre of Amboyna was altogether so black an atrocity as is commonly imagined; but on reading a little farther we are sensibly mortified to find that this lenient view of human nature is confined to the Dutch, or at least that it does not extend to the English, since Mr. Mill can believe, on the authority of a single writer, that about the time of the massacre, the English East-India Company “were in the regular habit of perpetrating tortures upon their own countrymen, and even their own servants—of torturing to death by whips or famine!”§ He considers a

sufficient

* See Parl. Hist. ad an. 1670, and Macpherson's Annals, vol. ii. p. 493.

† It is possible that Mr. Mill may not have read the account of Skinner's case in the Parliamentary History, which relates the imprisonment of the Company's officers by order of the House of Lords. If so, he has in this instance been guilty of gross negligence.

‡ Page 89.

§ Page 49, note.

sufficient proof of such facts as these to be furnished by the sole unsupported authority of Hamilton, an ignorant, illiterate interloper, who lived long after the alleged crimes are alleged to have been committed, and who was prompted by motives of revenge to represent the conduct and character of the Company in the blackest colours. It may be deemed truly marvellous that a writer, who cannot bring himself to believe that the Dutch, without a persuasion of the guilt of their victims, were capable of perpetrating the massacre of Amboyna, should think such slender and doubtful authority sufficient to convict his own countrymen of equal atrocities.

In page 26, Mr. Mill represents an engagement, near Swally, between some of the Company's ships and the Portuguese, to have occurred in 1611, whilst Mr. Bruce, his sole authority, says it took place in the November of the following year; and in the same page he tells us that the phirmaun of Jehangire, authorizing the first establishment of the English in the peninsula of Hindoostan, was received at Surat in January 1612, although Mr. Bruce, again his sole authority, places that event in 1613.* We are informed in page 35 that Ceylon is the most valuable of all the eastern islands, notwithstanding that its inferiority in value to Java is so well known. In page 48, Holland is carelessly mentioned as being a *kingdom* at the commencement of the seventeenth century, although it had then, for a considerable length of time, been a republic; and in page 60, it is related that contentions were running high between Charles I. and his parliament in 1635, although in that year no parliament was in being, and none existed between 1629 and 1640. Speaking, in page 79, of the charter for which the Company applied to Oliver Cromwell's government in 1657, Mr. Mill states that it is not ascertained whether it was ever received; whilst Mr. Bruce, in this case also the sole authority that is quoted, asserts positively that it *was* received.†

These are some of the errors into which Mr. Mill has fallen in so short a space as his first book; and although they are by no means of the same consequence as that capital defect of the history, which consists in the spirit of calumny towards the Company, which it so constantly displays, it is of some importance to point them out, since an exaggerated idea has certainly been formed of the accuracy of this writer with regard to facts. There are many persons, entertaining a very mean opinion of Mr. Mill's reasonings, who are forward to express much admiration of the pains he has employed in the collection of facts; but the errors which have been noticed, together with the many that remain to be pointed out, are sufficient to prove that the accuracy of the historian is by no means so great as is frequently imagined.

* See Bruce's Annals, vol. i. p. 164.

† Ibid., p. 529.