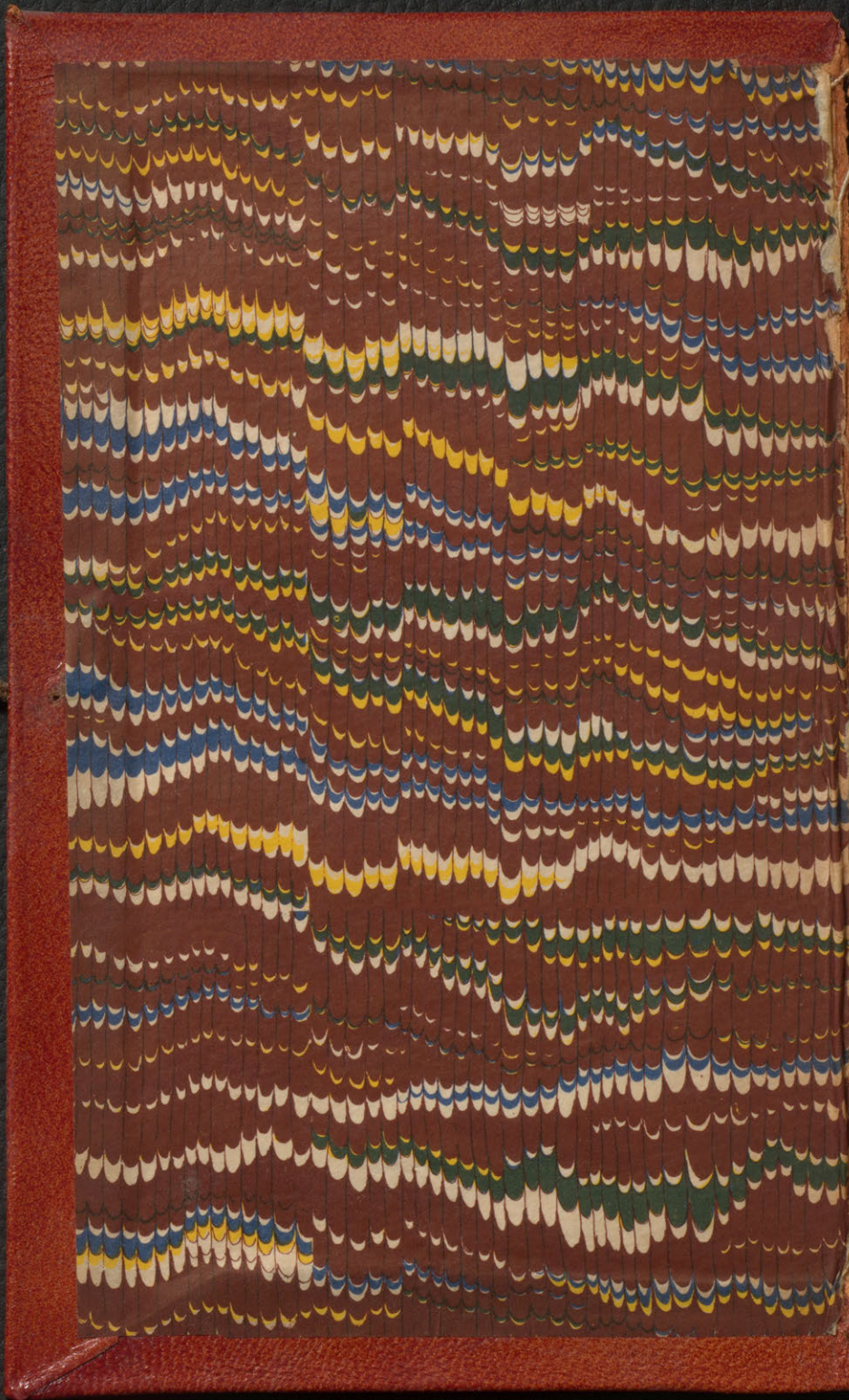
MR GODLEY'S LETTER
TO
MR GLADSTONE

1849



Godley, J.R.

Mr. Godley's Letter to Mr. Gladstone, on the Government of the Colonies.

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MR. GLADSTONE,

ON THE

GOVERNMENT OF THE COLONIES.

TO THE RIGHT HON. W. E. GLADSTONE, M.P.

Plymouth, 12th December, 1849.

My dear Mr. Gladstone,

On the eve of leaving England for one of our most distant colonies, I cannot resist the desire of saying a few words before I go, to the British public, on the subject of Colonial politics, under the new aspect which they have lately assumed; a subject in which I have long been speculatively interested, and in which I am now about to acquire a deep and immediate personal concern. And I have ventured, with your kind permission, to prefix your name to my observations; not from any presumed accordance between your views and my own, but simply because, as you seem to me to be the one among our leading statesmen who has most fully considered the question of Colonial reform, so you are the one most likely to appreciate and encourage the humblest effort to advance that cause.

Judging, indeed, from the speeches which you have made during the last two sessions, and from the line of conduct which you think it right to adopt with reference to this question, I infer that you do not agree with me; that is, that you are far from estimating so highly as I do the danger which threatens our Colonial empire, and the necessity of meeting it promptly by measures of thorough reform. If you did, I feel sure (from my faith in your patriotism and public spirit) that, waiving all considerations of a personal and party nature, you

would stand forth as the active champion of those searching remedies by which alone the disease which is consuming our greatness can now be cured. I speak confidently, perhaps presumptuously, but my convictions have at least not been formed without much thought and observation. My occupations have for some time past thrown me into habitual intercourse with colonists personally, and acquaintance with the various organs of Colonial opinion. No one has had better opportunities of appreciating the immense change which has lately come over the Colonial mind, and the utter hopelessness of satisfying it *now* with "gradual instalments" of freedom, A year or two ago I thought, as perhaps you think now, that, though a system so absurd in theory, and so unsuccessful in practice, as that by which our Colonies are ruled, must break down sooner or later, still it might last indefinitely,—for ten years to come, perhaps for twenty; and that our efforts might safely be directed to a *gradual* amelioration of it. I am now convinced that I was wrong: the real danger is, not that the despotism of the Colonial Office will last ten or twenty years —not that the colonists will be oppressed by it for an indefinite time to come—but that it may last just long enough to break up the British empire; a consummation which, at the present rate of progress, will not perhaps take a great deal more than ten or twenty *months*. I should be very glad now to be as sure that the flag of my country will not be hauled down during my lifetime in any part of the Queen's dominions, as I am that the hours of "Mr. Mothercountry's" reign are numbered. The point, therefore, which I am most anxious to urge upon you, as upon all Colonial reformers, is, that whereas they have hitherto pleaded in the interests, as they thought, of suffering colonies alone, they must now plead in the interests of British honour and British supremacy; that whereas the alternative has hitherto appeared to lie between local self-government and the centralism of Downing Street, now it is between local self-government and national independence. Many causes have contributed to this change in the aspect of the question; but the chief of them are these—first, the increased strength of the Colonies, or rather (perhaps) their increased consciousness of strength; and secondly, the growth in England of a political school holding the doctrine that the Colonies ought to be abandoned. As I am anxious to avoid even the semblance of writing in a party spirit, I forbear to enlarge on the stimulus imparted to the operation of both these causes by the persevering mismanagement to which the Colonies have been of late subjected; but it would be mere affectation to ignore altogether an influence so undeniable and so important.

On the one hand, I say, the Colonists have acquired an increased confidence in their own strength; a confidence

derived not only from the knowledge that their material resources are yearly increasing, but also from the moral power which is imparted by the experience of successful conflicts. Not only has the Colonial Office received many damaging defeats of late, but it has so timed its resistance and its concessions as to give precisely the utmost possible encouragement to Colonial revolt. Canada, for example, gained by rebellion nearly all for the sake of which she rebelled, and which during years of peaceful agitation she had been refused; and she is now given to understand very plainly by official people, that the rest of her demands will be similarly granted, if she apply in a similar way. New South Wales, too, has more than once within the last two years repulsed the aggressions of the Colonial Minister. But the turning-point of the conflict I consider to be the successful resistance of the Cape of Good Hope. It is morally impossible that the authority of Downing Street over the Colonies can long survive the shock which it has just received in South Africa. That small and feeble but highminded dependency has taught a lesson which others, more powerful at once and more aggrieved, will not be slow to learn. The machinery which she has employed for her special purpose may be employed by any other colony for any other purpose with respect to which the colonists shall be at issue with the Imperial Government; and, if equal energy and unanimity be displayed, with equal success. It will be used to obtain immunity from convict emigration in every shape; to acquire local self-government, or even to assert independence. Fortified places we may continue to hold, and naval stations: but I think it is henceforth established that we cannot govern, or even occupy, a distant colony permanently without the consent of its population. It would be useless to deny that these facts, and the knowledge of them prevailing among colonists, are very dangerous under present circumstances to the stability of the empire.

On the other hand, a political school has grown up in this country which is supposed to advocate the abandonment of colonies, on the ground that they do not "pay." I say supposed to advocate, because I do not know that the doctrine has yet been distinctly stated and fairly *avowed*. Still, there is no moral doubt of its being in fact held, or of its being in accordance with the general tone and views proclaimed by a powerful and increasing class of English politicians. With those who entertain this anti-Imperial doctrine, I need hardly tell you that I feel no sympathy; but I cannot help perceiving how formidable it is, because it falls in with the positive and material character of the age, and especially with the habits of thought prevailing among the now very powerful middle classes of this country. Moreover, I see manifold

grounds for believing that statesmen of far higher position and greater mark (some from spite, and more from indolence) regard the possibility of a separation between England and her Colonies without any kind of dissatisfaction. "Mr. Mothercountry" is of opinion, no doubt, that if our Colonial empire is not to be kept as a toy for *him* to play with, it is not worth keeping at all. On the whole, then, it appears to me that we are on the eve of what may truly be called a revolution in our Colonial relations; and that during the next year or two, in all probability, it will be decided whether "the British Empire" is to endure and to grow, as it has hitherto grown, for an indefinite time to come, or whether it is to shrink by a rapid progress of disintegration into the dimensions of two small islands. Now, although to me, an intending colonist, this consideration is one of deep and momentous import, it will appear, I fear, to a large portion of my countrymen a matter of comparative indifference. There are powerful and popular reasoners who will soon inquire openly, as they now do by implication, "What shall we lose by separation? If, as you say, colonies are no longer to be used as fields of official patronage—no longer to be debarred, for our profit, from the commerce of the world—no longer to be made receptacles for the surplus population of our gaols—if, in short, their proper functions are to be henceforth undischarged, what, we beg leave to ask, is the good of colonies?" This will soon become the question of the day; and it is one for which it behoves us to prepare betimes an answer.

The best argument, perhaps, against separation, is to be found in the strength and prevalence of a moral instinct which separatists do not recognise, and which they hardly understand, though they bear a strong testimony to its truth in the remarkable reluctance which they manifest to *avow* their doctrines. A true patriot personifies and idealizes his country, and rejoices in her greatness, her glory, and her pre-eminence, as a loving son would exult in the triumphs of a parent. Doubtless such greatness and glory may be too dearly bought; but that is not the question. I say that, independently of reasoning, they are *felt* to possess a great and real although an immaterial value, and that they are the more keenly so felt in the most heroic periods of a nation's history and by the best and noblest of its sons. Nay, I maintain, that the love of empire, properly understood—that is, the instinct of self-development and expansion—is an unfailing symptom of lusty and vigorous life in a people; and that, subject to the conditions of justice and humanity, it is not only legitimate, but most laudable. Certain I am, that the decline of such a feeling is always the result, not of matured wisdom or enlarged philanthropy, but of luxurious imbecility and selfish sloth. When the Roman eagles retreated across

the Danube, not the loss of Dacia, but the satisfaction of the Roman people at the loss, was the omen of the empire's fall. Or, to take an illustration nearer home, it is unquestionable that, notwithstanding the disgraceful circumstances under which America was torn from the grasp of England, we suffered less in prestige and in strength by that obstinate and disastrous struggle, than if, like the soft Triumvir, we had "lost a world, and been content to lose it." Depend upon it, the instinct of national pride is sound and true; and it is no foolish vanity which makes Englishmen shrink from the idea of seeing their country diminished and humbled in the eyes of the world.

But the case of those who defend the preservation of our Colonies does not rest on any such instinct alone; it rests also on perfectly tangible and material grounds. I will admit, for the sake of argument, that our trade with the colonies *might* not suffer by separation, though I have little doubt in fact that it *would*. A certain kind of emigration, too, such as that which now proceeds to the United States, would of course go on. But there would be no good colonization: no English gentlemen—indeed few Englishmen of any class who were not bad specimens of it—would deliberately renounce their allegiance, and place themselves in a position where they might be called upon, by their duty to their adopted country, to fight against the country which gave them birth. They would not consent to stand towards their friends and kindred in the relation of "foreigners;" they would never give up the name, the rights, and the privileges of Englishmen. This may be a very foolish and unphilosophical feeling; but experience as well as theory shows that it is entertained: and consequently, by making "foreign countries" of our Colonies, we should cut off on the one hand the best part of the British nation from colonization, and on the other we should abandon the plain duty of building up society *in its best form* throughout those wide regions which are destined to be peopled by our descendants. We should deliberately provide for the construction of hostile democracies out of the worst of the materials which compose the British people.

Again, the union of the provinces which make up the British empire constitutes a positive element of material strength. It is perhaps true, that now the value of our Colonies may be counterbalanced by their cost; but such has been the case only since the invention of the Colonial Office,—that is, since we have made colonies effeminate by our protection and disaffected by our tyranny. The early British Colonies contributed largely, both in men and money, to the military expenses of the Imperial treasury; they fitted out privateers to destroy the commerce of the common enemy; nor did they confine themselves to the defence of their own territory against ag-

gression, but single-handed they conquered and kept new realms for England. Why should we doubt that modern British Colonies, if allowed similar liberty, would show equal loyalty? Their Imperial patriotism is a thing of which we at home have but a faint idea. Until they are spoiled by bad government, they delight in their connexion with England, they worship the British flag, their eyes fill with tears at the thought of "home," and their highest boast is the share they claim in the triumphs of English literature, arts, and arms.

But, notwithstanding their good natural dispositions towards us, there is one thing which colonists will not endure at our hands,—and that is, being governed from Downing Street. They would not be Englishmen if they did. By a steady and persevering course of distant government, we *do* succeed in destroying, to a very great extent, the love of mother-country, and implanting in its place a feeling which is peculiar to colonies governed from home, a feeling made up of jealous dislike and cowardly dependence. But this is factitiously engendered, and would disappear with the causes that produced it. The normal sentiment of colonists towards England greatly resembles that felt by ourselves towards our Sovereigns. We should not like them to *govern* us; but so long as they abstain from that, our affection for them is not only enthusiastic, but deep and real. We rejoice in their joys, and sympathize with their sorrows, as matters in which we have a personal interest; nay, I fully believe that there are not many individuals in this island who would hesitate to sacrifice property and life in order to save the Queen from indignity or danger. Of a like nature is the feeling which colonists cherish for an ideal England; and I would ask those who hold that its existence and maintenance are of no importance, whether loyalty such as I have described (and such as is perfectly consistent with a determination to be self-governed) does not exercise a powerful and ennobling influence on the national character and national history of England?

It may seem that I have unnecessarily insisted on the desirableness of the Colonial connexion, and that I should have better employed my time in explaining and defending the practical means which I would propose for preserving it. I do not think so, however; and I am sure time will show that I am right. I am not going to waste arguments in support of the Municipal system as applied to Colonial government, because, in fact, everything has been said that can be said on that side of the question, whilst, literally, nothing worth notice has been said on the other. Besides, we really have passed the argumentative stage in this part of the business. That the Central system, whether right or wrong, will be speedily abolished, no man with a grain of political foresight can doubt. I repeat, that the only question which

remains to be settled is, whether its abolition shall be the result of a dissolution of our Colonial empire or not. I have therefore confined myself to urging a proposition which will be much more seriously debated,—namely, that such a dissolution is neither unavoidable nor desirable, but pre-eminently the reverse.

But it is necessary for me to state what I mean by local self-government; as the phrase, though hackneyed, has been much abused. I do *not* mean, then, mere powers of paving and lighting and road-making; nor the privilege of initiatory legislation; nor the liberty of making subordinate official appointments; I do not mean a regimen involving the reservation of civil lists, or the interposition of vetoes, or any other of those provisions in virtue of which Ministers in Downing Street are in the habit of interfering with the internal concerns of colonies. I mean by local self-government, the right and power to do, within the limits of each colony respectively, without check, control, or intervention of any kind, everything that the Supreme Government of this country can do within the limits of the British Islands—*with one exception.* I allude to the prerogative of regulating relations with foreign powers. This one prerogative, the concentration of which is essential to Imperial unity, the colonists themselves would gladly see reserved, in exchange for the privilege and the security of being identified with the empire: but more than this it is neither beneficial nor possible for us to retain. I need hardly say that my idea of self-government includes the power of making and altering local constitutions. We ought not, I am sure, to impose upon the colonists any form of government whatever, even to start with. When we shall have duly authorized them to act for themselves, our function with regard to their internal affairs should end. Paper constitutions, drawn up by amateurs without personal interest in the subject, never answer. All the best of the old Colonial constitutions were framed by the colonists; and while many of them have endured, with hardly an alteration, for more than two hundred years, all of them, whether altered from the originals or not, give (being home-made) perfect satisfaction to those who live under them. I have yet to hear of a Colonial Office constitution which has lasted ten years, or given a moment's satisfaction to any one but the doctrinaires who drew it. I define, then, the proper conditions (as they appear to me) of a Colonial relation to the Mother-country in three terms—1, an acknowledged allegiance; 2, a common citizenship; 3, an offensive and defensive alliance. Less than these it is idle to offer, because to these, after whatever struggles, we shall come at last; only that if granted after struggles, and not freely, they will perhaps lose all their efficacy.

As a matter of course, Colonies enjoying, as those of New England did, the perfect administration of their own affairs, ought not to cost the Mother-country a shilling for their government; and I am confident that, like Massachusetts and Pennsylvania of old, they would regard total pecuniary independence of the Mother-country as an important means of preserving their municipal privileges.

There is, I suppose, little doubt that even the Colonial Office will think it necessary to "do something" in the way of Colonial reform next year; nay, that what they do will be in advance on the absurd measures proposed last session; but I cannot bring myself to believe that they will do anything "thorough," and I most earnestly hope that the friends of the Colonies will not be satisfied with anything less. We must hear no more of "gradual ameliorations;" things have gone much too far for experiments and instalments; and the session after next it may be too late for *reform*. I conclude by repeating, that if to you at home the issue of this impending struggle be a matter of comparative indifference, I can answer for it that to British colonists it will appear one of absolutely vital moment. For my own part, I can only say, that though I might consent, in spite of reason and experience, to live in a colony permanently governed by a Minister in London, I would neither do so myself, nor ask others to do so, if the colony we founded were destined during our lifetime to be separated from the Mother-country. It is in the hope of seeing the only means adopted by which you can avert such a consummation that I now leave England.

Believe me, my dear Mr. Gladstone,

Yours very faithfully,

JOHN ROBERT GODLEY.

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