

DOCUMENTS

NEW LIGHT ON LONDON MERCHANT INVESTMENTS IN ST. DOMINGUE

In a recent article the writer called attention to the scarcity of documents in the Public Record Office dealing with the investments, presumably great, of certain London merchants in the French colony of St. Domingue during the British occupation (1793-1798).¹ With the material at hand, it was impossible even to estimate the amount. Happily, it is no longer impossible to do so. M. Gabriel Debien of the University of Cairo, Egypt, has kindly written me and consented to the publication of the text of the letter reproduced below which provides a contemporary estimate of the investments down to 1797, the year before the evacuation. M. Debien purchased the original manuscript, with others, at a sale of Henry Dundas (Lord Melville) Papers some years ago.²

This unsigned letter, written by John Turnbull of the important firm Turnbull, Forbes & Co.,³ is addressed to Henry Dundas, then secretary of state for war. It aims to acquaint the minister and his colleagues, who were ostensibly about to order the evacuation of the areas held by the British in St. Domingue, with the facts concerning merchant investments there. Curiously, Turnbull is more definite

¹ Carl Ludwig Lokke, "London Merchant Interest in the St. Domingue Plantations of the Emigrés, 1793-1798," *American Historical Review*, XLIII (July, 1938), p. 801.

² M. Debien is a collector of and a writer on the sources of the history of the French colonies, particularly St. Domingue. His publications include "Les sources de l'histoire coloniale aux archives de la Vienne," *Revue des bibliothèques* (1934), pp. 3-50; "Les archives privées et l'histoire pour connaître un type de fortunes: les archives de quelques familles [de] planteurs antillais," *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* (September, 1938), pp. 424-428; *Les sources manuscrites de l'histoire et de la géographie de Saint-Domingue* (Port-au-Prince, n.d.). He has recently published a valuable monograph, *Une plantation de Saint-Domingue: la sucrerie Galbaud du Fort, 1690-1802* (Cairo, 1941).

³ Before the war this firm was "very largely concerned in trade" with southern Europe where it had established several branch houses. Turnbull, Forbes & Co. to Duke of Portland, July 6, 1798. Public Record Office, War Office, 1/68, ff. 465-467. Gouverneur Morris mentions the firm in his diary, December 21, 1789. Beatrix Cary Davenport, ed., *A diary of the French Revolution* (Boston, 1939), I, 339.

about other houses than his own. The one most involved, he says, is that of Muilman & Co. This firm, now bankrupt following the suicide of its leading member, "has advanced the largest sum to the former proprietors of estates in St. Domingue and engaged the largest in making shipments to that island"; its advances amount to about £100,000.⁴ Some eight or ten lesser houses have probably advanced a like sum.⁵ As regards his own firm, Turnbull declares that in some respects it is a greater "sufferer" than that of Muilman & Co. The expenditure has taken several forms: advances in cash to a number of St. Domingue proprietors in London, the purchase and management of several important plantations, notably the Rohan estate, and the founding of a branch establishment in Port-au-Prince. Turnbull, Forbes & Co.'s total financial investment probably approached £100,000.⁶

According to Turnbull's figures, then, some ten or twelve London merchant firms were involved in St. Domingue to the extent of about £300,000. This was no mean sum in those days. It helps to explain why the British government in roughly the same period sacrificed more than £4,000,000 in an effort to conquer the French colony and maintain or restore Negro slavery.⁷ It helps to explain also why

⁴On February 14, 1794, in a letter to Dundas, Malouet, the agent of the French planters in London, describes the activities of this firm as follows: "Voici des Bâtimen[t]s, celui de M.M. Muilman & C^e nommément, partant en droiture pour Saint Domingue. l'entreprise de ces messieurs est en quelque sorte nationale pour l'Angleterre par l'immensité des affaires qu'ils ont commencés[s] dans tous les quartiers de la colonie soumis ou non soumis aux anglais. elle n'est pas moins secourable pour les propositions français[es] par la facilité obligéante avec laquelle ils ont accueilli une multitude de malheureux sans ressources." P.R.O., W.O., 1/59, ff. 45-48. For Malouet's personal dealings with Muilman & Co. before it went bankrupt early in 1797, see *Mémoires de Malouet*, second edition (Paris, 1874), II, 421, 494.

⁵This number is too small. In July, 1794, no fewer than fifteen lesser houses joined Muilman & Co. and Turnbull, Forbes & Co. in signing a petition to the Duke of Portland urging him to press the conquest of St. Domingue. To these must be added three others which signed a proprietors' petition this same month but not that of their fellow-merchants. Thus at least eighteen lesser firms had an interest in the colony from the first year of the attempted conquest. It is possible, of course, that several of these had liquidated their interests there by 1797.

⁶In its letter to Portland, cited above, note 3, the firm declared "that the amount of their consignments, in sugars and coffee, last year [1797], exceeded £40,000, & on that of their Exports to that Island, amounted to upwards of £15,000."

⁷The total "amount of Bills drawn from or on account of the Island of St. Domingo, presented at the Treasury in the years" 1794 to May 1, 1797 was

Wilberforce's abolitionist program suffered a momentary eclipse. But we need to be careful not to put too much faith in Turnbull and his figures. After all, this merchant had an interest in making them as large as possible. Moreover, he was capable of making arithmetical errors to his own advantage. Still, his estimates, "although necessarily not accurate, nor correct," clearly have some validity and may be accepted until they can be checked against other data.

CARL LUDWIG LOKKE.

The National Archives.

I

John Turnbull to Henry Dundas

London, November 17, 1797

Sir,

In consequence of the intimation, that you were pleased to give me when I had the honor, a few days since, to pay you my respects, of the intention of His Majesty's Ministers, to order the troops to evacuate the town of Port-au-Prince and the adjoining Districts in Saint-Domingo; and the wish you expressed to know to what extent the British Subjects might suffer by such evacuation, I have endeavoured privately to acquire the best information I could on this subject and the following statement thereof, altho' necessarily not accurate, nor correct, may serve to give a general idea of the depending commercial concerns in that Quarter.

The House in trade, that has advanced the largest sums to the former proprietors of estates in St. Domingo and engaged the largest in making shipments to that island, was MM. Muilman & C^o whose principal, M^r Chiswell, made away with himself and the house became insolvent. Their advance and dependencies, I am inclined to think, amount to about £100,000, but as a great part thereof, was advanced on speculation to the Proprietors of estates in the Plain of Cape Francois and other quarters which have never been under the protection nor Government of the English, it is impossible to me to discriminate, what just claims they might have, on the British Government, for redress.

The greatest sufferers, after Mess^{rs} Muilman and in some respects, much greater than them, are my house of Turnbull, Forbes & Co; but before I submit the nature and extent of the losses we must

£4,383,596 8s. 2d. Great Britain: House of Commons, *Parliamentary Papers before 1801*, Vol. 45, No. 867. *Annual Register*, 1797 (London, 1800); appendix to the chronicles, p. 110.

sustain and which can be substantiated to perfect satisfaction, I beg leave to mention that comparatively to Martinico, there are very few British merchants that have any concerns of consequence at St. Domingo. The number in all exclusive of Muilman's house and ours, will not in my opinion, exceed eight or ten, and the whole and aggregate amount of their depending concerns in that island, I should not conceive would exceed £100,000. Some of them are also circumstanced like Mess. Muilman: having made advances to proprietors whose estates have never been under the protection of the English. With respect to ourselves, we have been induced from various circumstances and considerations, which at the time appeared to be rational and well founded to enter into large engagements with that island; and to establish a house of trade, wherein we are concerned, at Port-au-Prince, under the firm of Bertrand Littledale & Co. This I believe, is the only commercial establishment wherein any British subjects are concerned at Port-au-Prince or that we know of, in the Island of St. Domingo. The value of the debts, goods on hand, and other dependancies of our said house must be considerable and except what can be removed, in the event of evacuation, must be abandoned.

We have also advanced in cash to different proprietors of Estates, per the list herewith, in various parts of the island, which are now or which have been under the protection of the British arms, chiefly for their subsistence in England and on the security of their estates to the amount of [blank].⁸ This sum, there is reason to believe that His Majesty's ministers would have had the goodness to have stipulated, should have been in some way made good to us, in case that the Island had been returned to the French by negociation; but if the Districts in question, are evacuated the debts owing to us can never be reclaimed, and must be totally irrecoverable from the Estates in whose security they were contracted.

The next object to which we are unfortunately obliged to solicit the consideration of His Majesty's Ministers is of much greater importance—the illustrious, now emigrant, family of Rohan, consisting of the Cardinal, the archbishop of Cambray and the Prince of Guemenee, father of the Prince of Rohan, when the English conquered the District of Arcahay, were in possession of the most valuable estate in that quarter, which formerly belonged to their brother the late prince de Montbazon, who had been governor of St. Domingo.⁹ The coheirs gave the charge of it to us and we have

⁸ £8,479 6s. 8d. See Document II, below.

⁹ Louis Armand Constantin, Chevalier de Rohan, Prince de Montbazon, governor of St. Domingue from 1766 to 1769, was guillotined in July, 1794. *Mémoires*

managed it in the best manner for their interest, and have rendered it very productive and advantageous to them.—Latterly, they have been extremely desirous to dispose of their said estate of which we have had for some years the deed of sale, and which stands in our name and as our property in the registers of St. Domingo.¹⁰ Under present circumstances no purchaser could be found to it, at any price whatever and as the archbishop and the prince de Guemenee, had no other means of subsistence, nor any other resource,¹¹ but from that estate, we agreed *bona fide* to purchase it at the price of thirty six thousand pounds, to be paid by annual instalments; we engaging to use our utmost endeavors to maintain the possession of it and taking all risks of profit and loss from the produce to ourselves; and they guaranteeing to us, that we should not be deprived, from any cause whatever of the possession. The sugars that we have already received in this year, from that estate, exceed 400 hogsheads, and render of nett produce after deducting freight, insurance and all charges, upwards of £8000 sterling. From the security of that habitation we have been chiefly induced to enter into large engagement with the prince of Rohan, and deprived of it his nearest relatives—except the Cardinal who still possesses some very little territory about Ettenheim—will be destitute of every means of subsistence. Besides the positive losses, that we have stated, which that family and ourselves must inevitably suffer, from the evacuation of Port-au-Prince and its territorial dependancies, we have the entire charge of the habitation of Chatulet, in that district of l'Arcahaye belonging to the Rochefoucauld family, and producing from a much greater number of negroes, a still greater quantity and value of sugars than the Rohan estate. We have also the consignments of several other very valuable estates in that district and we have already received to our address in this year, besides much more that will be shipt before the end of it, 1364 hogsheads of sugar and 126 casks of coffee. Our regular commissions on the Business we do in exports to and imports

de Malouet, I, 31, note 5. He evidently acquired this great plantation during his residence in the colony. His memory is preserved in the plantation *Prince* in Arcahaye where he had great works constructed. Adolphe Cabon, *Histoire d'Haïti* (Port-au-Prince, n.d.), I, 300-301.

¹⁰ As early as July 27, 1795, Turnbull, Forbes & Co. informed the Duke of Portland that it had purchased the Montbazon estate but was withholding payment until the time of taking possession. P.R.O., W.O., 1/61, f. 285.

¹¹ Professor Georges Lefebvre in his new book, *Quatre-vingt-neuf* (Paris, 1939) p. 14, refers to the well-known bankruptcy of the Guéméné family at the time of the Revolution. It seems likely indeed that the family would have been dependent on the income from their St. Domingue estate even if the Revolution had not caused them to flee from France.

from Port-au-Prince may at least be computed at £3000 per annum. These statements are far from being overrated or exaggerated—they can be easily proved to compleat satisfaction, and we will be happy to do so, either by declarations to the same effect, on Oath or by submitting the investigation to any persons that may be appointed— I entreat you sir, to excuse the tediousness of this detail, which the interests of the parties and the nature of the circumstances, would not admit of my making shorter. They, at the same time with myself, threw ourselves, with great submission and well founded Hope on the Justice and Equity of His Majesty's Ministers. From their experienced consideration of distress, on every occasion, we are persuaded that they will not suffer by the evacuation in question, the only English house at Port-au-Prince, to be totally ruined; the family of Rohan to be reduced to the greatest misery, and we, after much trouble and hazard to be deprived of advantages, that we had acquired, all of us solely trusting to the protection of the British arms, without any fault whatever on our parts. In the present times, I neither presume to ask, nor even to wish, a pecuniary compensation and much less to deprecate a measure of great public retrenchment and utility, but I trust, that, thinking my request to be just, you will have the goodness to intercede with M^r Pitt that an establishment may be allotted for Mrs. Bertrand Littledale & Co in Trinidad or Demerary, when they are compelled to fly from Port-au-Prince, and that certain portions of lands, at present, waste and unoccupied may be appropriated in the island of Trinidad and the settlements of Demerary, Essequibo, and Berbice for the benefit and use of Mess. Bertrand Littledale & Co, the family of Rohan and my house of Turnbull, Forbes and Co, in consideration of the very great and positive losses that we shall sustain, both from the debts that are owing to us, and which will become irrecoverable and the commercial advantages which at great expense, trouble and risk, we now derive from that settlement. From M. Pitt's consideration and goodness, I feel confidence to hope that he will be pleased to determine on some place, where MM. Bertrand Littledale & Co may settle, when they are obliged to quit Port-au-Prince and that we may be enabled to continue to afford the means of subsistence, to the different branches of the unfortunate family of Rohan.

I have the honor to be very respectfully

II

Mr. Turnbull presents his respects to M^r Dundas and begs his permission to transmit to him herewith the accounts of the sums ad-

vanced by his House of Turnbull Forbes and Co to the Proprietors of Estates in St. Domingo. which account has been omitted to be sent with the letter which M^r Turnbull had the honor to write to M^r Dundas yesterday

Broadstreet, 18 Nov 1797

Sums supplied by M^M. Turnbull, Forbes & Co. to sundry proprietors of estates in St. Domingo on the security of their said estates¹²

Madame de Beaumont	439	14	11
de Cocherel	722	3	8
d'Ouge [d'Ougé]	30		
la ctessè de Sediere	639	16	3
de Bongard	87	3	
la comtessè O'Connell	601	13	2
de Pressigny	90		
Mademoiselle Ferron	81	5	10
Monsieur d'Audige	20		
le Vte d'Osmond	144	1	6
Dupuy-Montbrun	85	12	
Cte d'Agoult	520	19	6
'' de Sediere	295	2	3
'' d'Heliand	81	4	5
le Mis de Massiac	825	16	4
de Laubriere	565	8	7
Dillon	12		
de Vaublanc	38	5	
de Mussey	374	3	
Cte O'Mahon	430	12	8
la Sommiere fils	28		
de Saint-Julien	60		
de Fontenay	284	15	
le Mis d'Aussigny	321	15	11
de Broue	25		
Mis de Gouvello	1144	1	9
de Souche	61	9	
de Saint-Olympe	469	2	11
	<u>[£]8,479</u>	<u>6[s]</u>	<u>8[d]</u>

¹² On July 6, 1798, Mr. Turnbull's firm submitted a similar list of names and sums to the Duke of Portland. P.R.O., W.O., 1/68, f. 469.