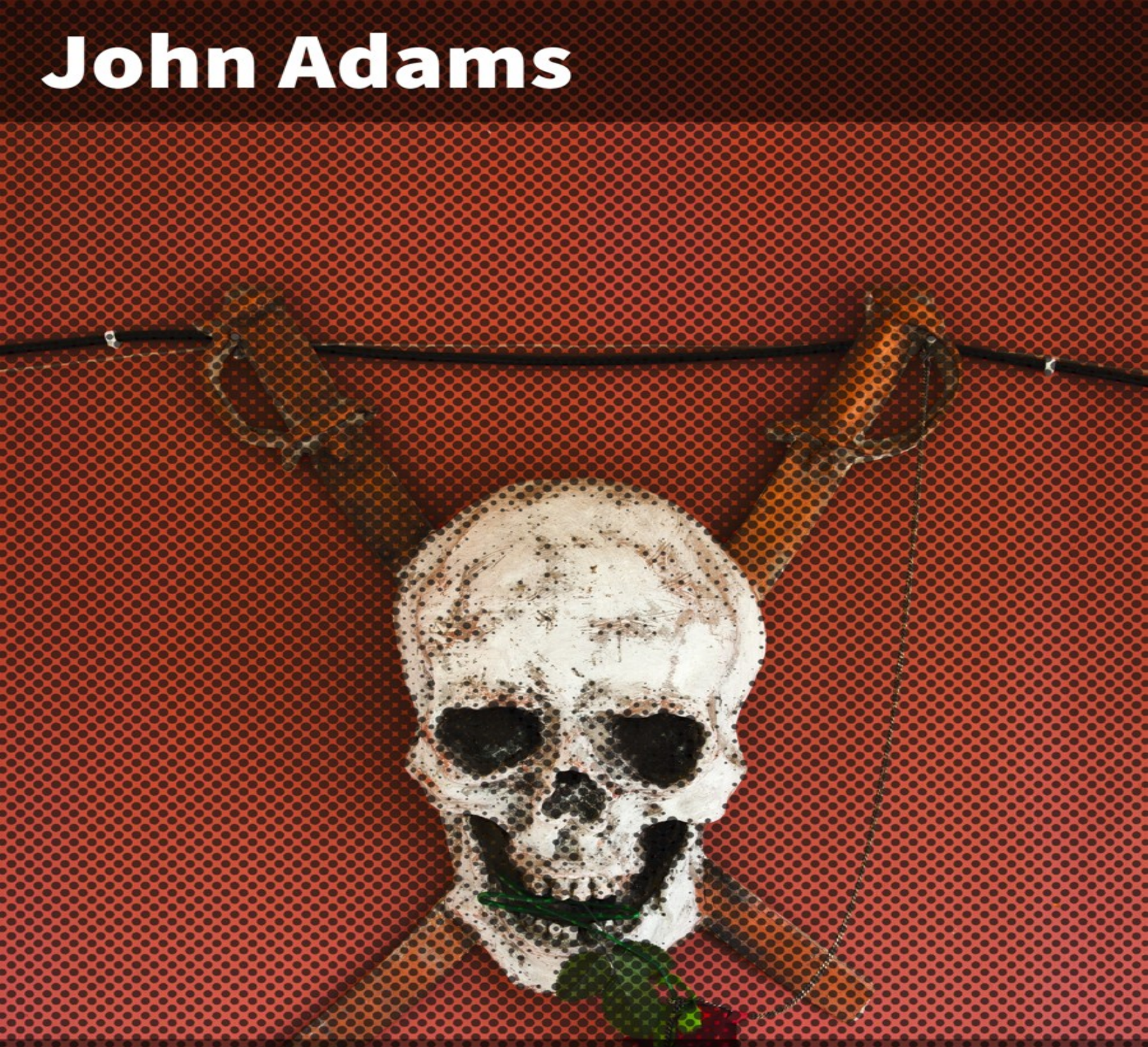
John Adams



Novanglus Essays

John Adams

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ADDRESSED
January 23, 1775.

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ADDRESSED

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To the Inhabitants of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay,

January 23, 1775.

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MY FRIENDS,

A WRITER, under the signature of *Massachusettensis*, has addressed you, in a series of papers, on the great national subject of the present quarrel between the British administration and the Colonies. As I have not in my possession more than one of his essays, and that is in the Gazette of December 26, I will take the liberty, in the spirit of candor and decency, to bespeak your attention upon the same subject.

There may be occasion to say very severe things, before I shall have finished what I propose, in opposition to this writer, but there ought to be no reviling. *Rem ipsam dic, mitte male loqui*, which may be justly translated, speak out the whole truth boldly, but use no bad language.

It is not very material to inquire, as others have done, who is the author of the speculations in question. If he is a disinterested writer, and has nothing to gain or to lose, to hope or to fear, for himself more than other individuals of your community; but engages in this controversy from the purest principles, the noblest motives of benevolence to

men, and of love to his country, he ought to have no influence with you, further than truth and justice will support his argument. On the other hand, if he hopes to acquire or preserve a lucrative employment, to screen himself from the just detestation of his countrymen, or whatever other sinister inducement he may have, so far as the truth of facts and the weight of argument are in his favor, he ought to be duly regarded.

He tells you, “that the temporal salvation of this province depends upon an entire and speedy change of measures, which must depend upon a change of sentiment respecting our own conduct and the justice of the British nation.”

The task of effecting these great changes, this courageous writer has undertaken in a course of publications in a newspaper. *Nil desperandum* is a good motto, and *nil admirari* is another. He is welcome to the first, and I hope will be willing that I should assume the last. The public, if they are not mistaken in their conjecture, have been so long acquainted with this gentleman, and have seen him so often disappointed, that if they were not habituated to strange things, they would wonder at his hopes, at this time, to accomplish the most unpromising project of his whole life. In the character of Philanthrop, he attempted to reconcile you to Mr. Bernard. But the only fruit of his labor was, to expose his client to more general examination, and consequently to more general resentment and aversion. In the character of Philalethes, he essayed to prove Mr. Hutchinson a patriot, and his letters not only innocent but meritorious. But the more you read and considered, the more you were convinced of the ambition

and avarice, the simulation and dissimulation, the hypocrisy and perfidy of that destroying angel.

This illfated and unsuccessful, though persevering writer, still hopes to change your sentiments and conduct—by which it is supposed that he means to convince you, that the system of colony administration which has been pursued for these ten or twelve years past is a wise, righteous, and humane plan; that Sir Francis Bernard and Mr. Hutchinson, with their connections,who have been the principal instruments of it, are your best friends;—and that those gentlemen, in this province, and in all the other colonies, who have been in opposition to it, are, from ignorance, error, or from worse and baser causes, your worst enemies.

This is certainly an inquiry that is worthy of you; and I promise to accompany this writer in his ingenious labors to assist you in it. And I earnestly entreat you, as the result of all shall be, to change your sentiments or persevere in them, as the evidence shall appear to you, upon the most dispassionate and impartial consideration, without regard to his opinion or mine.

He promises to avoid personal reflections, but to penetrate the arcana and expose the wretched policy of the whigs. The cause of the whigs is not conducted by intrigues at a distant court, but by constant appeals to a sensible and virtuous people; it depends entirely on their good-will, and cannot be pursued a single step without their concurrence, to obtain which, all their designs, measures, and means, are constantly published to the collective body. The whigs, therefore, can have no arcana; but if they had, I dare say

they were never so left, as to communicate them to this writer; you will therefore be disappointed, if you expect from him any thing which is true, but what has been as public as records and newspapers could make it.

I, on my part, may, perhaps, in a course of papers, penetrate arcana too. Shew the wicked policy of the tories—trace their plan from its first rude sketches to its present complete draught; show that it has been much longer in contemplation than is generally known,—who were the first in it—their views, motives, and secret springs of action—and the means they have employed. This will necessarily bring before your eyes many characters, living and dead. From such a research and detail of facts, it will clearly appear, who were the aggressors—and who have acted on the defensive from first to last—who are still struggling, at the expense of their ease, health, peace, wealth, and preferment, against the encroachments of the tories on their country, and who are determined to continue struggling, at much greater hazards still, and, like the Prince of Orange, are resolved never to see its entire subjection to arbitrary power, but rather to die fighting against it in the last ditch.

It is true, as this writer observes, “that the bulk of the people are generally but little versed in the affairs of state;” that they “rest the affairs of government in the hands where accident has placed them.” If this had not been true, the designs of the tories had been many years ago entirely defeated. It was clearly seen by a few, more than ten years since, that they were planning and pursuing the very measures we now see executing. The people were informed

of it, and warned of their danger; but they had been accustomed to confide in certain persons, and could never be persuaded to believe, until prophecy became history. Now, they see and feel that the horrible calamities are come upon them, which were foretold so many years ago, and they now sufficiently execrate the men who have brought these things upon them. Now, alas! when perhaps it is too late. If they had withdrawn their confidence from them in season, they would have wholly disarmed them.

“The same game, with the same success, has been played in all ages and countries,” as Massachusettensis observes. When a favorable conjuncture has presented, some of the most intriguing and powerful citizens have conceived the design of enslaving their country, and building their own greatness on its ruins. Philip and Alexander are examples of this in Greece; Caesar in Rome; Charles V. in Spain; Louis XII. in France; and ten thousand others.

“There is a latent spark in the breasts of the people, capable of being kindled into a flame, and to do this has always been the employment of the disaffected.” What is this latent spark? The love of liberty. *A Deo hominis est indita naturae*. Human nature itself is evermore an advocate for liberty. There is also in human nature a resentment of injury and indignation against wrong; a love of truth, and a veneration for virtue. These amiable passions are the “latent spark” to which those whom this writer calls the “disaffected” apply. If the people are capable of understanding, seeing, and feeling the difference between true and false, right and wrong, virtue and vice, to what

better principle can the friends of mankind apply, than to the sense of this difference? Is it better to apply, as this writer and his friends do, to the basest passions in the human breast—-to their fear, their vanity, their avarice, ambition, and every kind of corruption? I appeal to all experience, and to universal history, if it has ever been in the power of popular leaders, uninvested with other authority than what is conferred by the popular suffrage, to persuade a large people, for any length of time together, to think themselves wronged, injured, and oppressed, unless they really were, and saw and felt it to be so.

“They,” the popular leaders, “begin by reminding the people of the elevated rank they hold in the universe, as men; that all men by nature are equal; that kings are but the ministers of the people; that their authority is delegated to them by the people, for their good, and they have a right to resume it, and place it in other hands, or keep it themselves, whenever it is made use of to oppress them. Doubtless, there have been instances when these principles have been inculcated to obtain a redress of real grievances; but they have been much oftener perverted to the worst of purposes.”

These are what are called revolution principles. They are the principles of Aristotle and Plato, of Livy and Cicero, and Sidney, Harrington, and Locke; the principles of nature and eternal reason; the principles on which the whole government over us now stands. It is therefore astonishing, if any thing can be so, that writers, who call themselves friends of government, should in this age and country be so

inconsistent with themselves, so indiscreet, so immodest, as to insinuate a doubt concerning them.

Yet we find that these principles stand in the way of Massachusettensis and all the writers of his class. The Veteran, in his letter to the officers of the army, allows them to be noble and true; but says the application of them to particular cases is wild and utopian. How they can be in general true, and not applicable to particular cases, I cannot comprehend. I thought their being true in general, was because they were applicable in most particular cases.

Gravity is a principle in nature. Why? Because all particular bodies are found to gravitate. How would it sound to say, that bodies in general are heavy; yet to apply this to particular bodies, and say, that a guinea or a ball is heavy, is wild? “Adopted in private life,” says the honest amiable veteran, “they would introduce perpetual discord.” This I deny; and I think it plain, that there never was a happy private family where they were not adopted. “In the state, perpetual discord.” This I deny; and affirm, that order, concord, and stability in this state, never was nor can be preserved without them. “The least failure in the reciprocal duties of worship and obedience in the matrimonial contract would justify a divorce.” This is no consequence from these principles. A total departure from the ends and designs of the contract, it true, as elopement and adultery, would by these principles justify a divorce; but not the least failure, or many smaller failures in the reciprocal duties, &c. “In the political compact, the smallest defect in the prince, a revolution.” By no means; but a manifest design in the prince, to annul the contract on his part, will annul it on the

part of the people. A settled plan to deprive the people of all the benefits, blessings, and ends of the contract, to subvert the fundamentals of the constitution, to deprive them of all share in making and executing laws, will justify a revolution.

The author of a “Friendly Address to all reasonable Americans” discovers his rancor against these principles in a more explicit manner; and makes no scruples to advance the principles of Hobbes and Filmer boldly, and to pronounce damnation, *ore rotundo*, on all who do not practise implicit, passive obedience to an established government, of whatever character it may be. It is not reviling, it is not bad language, it is strictly decent to say, that this angry bigot, this ignorant dogmatist, this foul-mouthed scold, deserves no other answer than silent contempt. Massachusettensis and the Veteran—- admire the first for his art, the last for his honesty.

Massachusettensis is more discreet than any of the others; sensible that these principles would be very troublesome to him, yet conscious of their truth, he has neither admitted nor denied them. But we have a right to his opinion of them, before we dispute with him. He finds fault with the application of them. They have been invariably applied, in support of the revolution and the present establishment, against the Stuarts, the Charleses, and the Jameses, in support of the Reformation and the Protestant religion; and against the worst tyranny that the genius of toryism has ever yet invented; mean the Roman superstition. Does this writer rank the revolution and present establishment, the Reformation and Protestant religion, among his worst of purposes? What “worse

purpose” is there than established tyranny? Were these principles ever inculcated in favor of such tyranny? Have they not always been used against such tyrannies, when the people have had knowledge enough to be apprized of them, and courage to assert them? Do not those who aim at depriving the people of their liberties, always inculcate opposite principles, or discredit these?

“A small mistake in point of policy,” says he, “often furnishes a pretence to libel government, and persuade the people that their rulers are tyrants, and the whole government a system of oppression.” This is not only untrue, but inconsistent with what he said before. The people are in their nature so gentle, that there never was a government yet in which thousands of mistakes were not overlooked. The most sensible and jealous people are so little attentive to government, that there are no instances of resistance, until repeated, multiplied oppressions have placed it beyond a doubt, that their rulers had formed settled plans to deprive them of their liberties; not to oppress an individual or a few, but to break down the fences of a free constitution, and deprive the people at large of all share in the government, and all the checks by which it is limited. Even Machiavel himself allows, that, not ingratitude to their rulers, but much love, is the constant fault of the people.

This writer is equally mistaken, when he says, the people are sure to be losers in the end. They can hardly be losers if unsuccessful; because, if they live, they can but be slaves, after an unfortunate effort, and slaves they would have been, if they had not resisted. So that nothing is lost. If they

die, they cannot be said to lose, for death is better than slavery. If they succeed, their gains are immense. They preserve their liberties. The instances in antiquity which this writer alludes to are not mentioned, and therefore cannot be answered; but that in the country from whence we are derived, is the most unfortunate for his purpose that could have been chosen. No doubt he means, the resistance to Charles I. and the case of Cromwell. But the people of England, and the cause of liberty, truth, virtue, and humanity, gained infinite advantages by that resistance. In all human probability, liberty, civil and religious, not only in England, but in all Europe, would have been lost. Charles would undoubtedly have established the Romish religion, and a despotism as wild as any in the world. And as England has been a principal bulwark, from that period to this, of civil liberty and the Protestant religion in all Europe, if Charles's schemes had succeeded, there is great reason to apprehend that the light of science would have been extinguished, and mankind drawn back to a state of darkness and misery like that which prevailed from the fourth to the fourteenth century. It is true, and to be lamented, that Cromwell did not establish a government as free as he might and ought; but his government was infinitely more glorious and happy to the people than Charles's. Did not the people gain by the resistance to James II.? Did not the Romans gain by the resistance to Tarquin? Without that resistance, and the liberty that was restored by it, would the great Roman orators, poets, and historians, the great teachers of humanity and politeness, the pride of human nature, and the delight and glory of

mankind for seventeen hundred years, ever have existed? Did not the Romans gain by resistance to the Decemvirs? Did not the English gain by resistance to John, when Magna Charta was obtained? Did not the Seven United Provinces gain by resistance to Philip, Alva, and Granvelle? Did not the Swiss Cantons, the Genevans, and Grisons gain by resistance to Albert and Gessler?

I have heretofore intimated my intention of pursuing the tories through all their dark intrigues and wicked machinations, and to show the rise and progress of their schemes for enslaving this country. The honor of inventing and contriving these measures is not their due. They have been but servile copiers of the designs of Andros, Randolph, Dudley, and other champions of their cause towards the close of the last century. These latter worthies accomplished but little; and their plans had been buried with them for a long course of years, until, in the administration of the late Governor Shirley, they were revived by the persons who are now principally concerned in carrying them into execution. Shirley was a crafty, busy, ambitious, intriguing, enterprising man; and, having mounted, no matter by what means, to the chair of this province, he saw, in a young, growing country, vast prospects of ambition opening before his eyes, and conceived great designs of aggrandizing himself, his family, and his friends. Mr. Hutchinson and Mr. Oliver, the two famous letter-writers, were his principal ministers of state; Russell, Paxton, Ruggles, and a few others, were *subordinate* instruments. Among other schemes of this junto, one was to have a revenue in America, by authority of parliament.

In order to effect their purpose, it was necessary to concert measures with the other colonies. Dr. Franklin, who was known to be an active and very able man, and to have great influence in the province of Pennsylvania, was in Boston in the year 1754, and Mr. Shirley communicated to him the profound secret,—-the great design of taxing the colonies by act of parliament. This sagacious gentleman,

this eminent philosopher and distinguished patriot, to his lasting honor, sent the Governor an answer in writing, with the following remarks upon his scheme, remarks which would have discouraged any honest man from the pursuit. The remarks are these:—-

“That the people always bear the burden best, when they have, or think they have, some *share* in the direction.

“That when public measures are generally distasteful to the people, the wheels of government must move more heavily.

“That excluding the people of America from all share in the choice of a grand council for their own defence, and taxing them in parliament, where they have no representative, would probably give extreme dissatisfaction.

“That there was no reason to doubt the willingness of the colonists to contribute for their own defence. That the people themselves, whose all was at stake, could better judge of the force necessary for their defence, and of the means for raising money for the purpose, than a British parliament at so great distance.

“That natives of America would be as likely to consult wisely and faithfully for the safety of their native country, as the governors sent from Britain, whose object is generally to make fortunes, and then return home, and who might therefore be expected to carry on the war against France, rather in a way by which themselves were likely to be gainers, than for the greatest advantage of the cause.

“That compelling the colonies to pay money for their own defence, without their consent, would show a suspicion of their loyalty, or of their regard for their country, or of their

common sense, and would be treating them as conquered enemies, and not as free Britons, who hold it for their undoubted right, not to be taxed but by their own consent, given through their representatives.

“That parliamentary taxes, once laid on, are often continued, after the necessity for laying them on ceases; but that if the colonists were trusted to tax themselves, they would remove the burden from the people as soon as it should become unnecessary for them to bear it any longer.

“That if parliament is to tax the colonies, their assemblies of representatives may be dismissed as useless.

“That taxing the colonies in parliament for their own defence against the French, is not more just, than it would be to oblige the cinque-ports, and other parts of Britain, to maintain a force against France, and tax them for this purpose, without allowing them representatives in parliament.

“That the colonists have always been indirectly taxed by the mother country, (besides paying the taxes necessarily laid on by their own assemblies); inasmuch as they are obliged to purchase the manufactures of Britain, charged with innumerable heavy taxes, some of which manufactures they could make, and others could purchase cheaper at markets.

“That the colonists are besides taxed by the mother country, by being obliged to carry great part of their produce to Britain, and accept a lower price than they might have at other markets. The difference is a tax paid to Britain.

“That the whole wealth of the colonists centres at last in the mother country, which enables her to pay her taxes.

“That the colonies have, at the hazard of their lives and fortunes, extended the dominions and increased the commerce and riches of the mother country; that therefore the colonists do not deserve to be deprived of the native right of Britons, the right of being taxed only by representatives chosen by themselves.

“That an adequate representation in parliament would probably be acceptable to the colonists, and would best raise the views and interests of the whole empire.”

The last of these propositions seems not to have been well considered; because an adequate representation in parliament is totally impracticable; but the others have exhausted the subject.[1]

Whether the ministry at home, or the junto here, were discouraged by these masterly remarks, or by any other cause, the project of taxing the colonies was laid aside; Mr. Shirley was removed from this government, and Mr. Pownall was placed in his stead.

Mr. Pownall seems to have been a friend to liberty and to our constitution, and to have had an aversion to all plots against either; and, consequently, to have given his confidence to other persons than Hutchinson and Oliver, who, stung with envy against Mr. Pratt and others, who had the lead in affairs, set themselves, by propagating slanders against the Governor among the people, and especially among the clergy, to raise discontents, and make him uneasy in his seat. Pownall, averse to wrangling, and fond of the delights of England, solicited to be recalled, and after

some time Mr. Bernard was removed from New Jersey to the chair of this province.

Bernard was the man for the purpose of the junto. Educated in the highest principles of monarchy; naturally daring and courageous; skilled enough in law and policy to do mischief, and avaricious to a most infamous degree; needy, at the same time, and having a numerous family to provide for, he was an instrument suitable in every respect, excepting one, for this junto to employ. The exception I mean was blunt frankness, very opposite to that cautious cunning, that deep dissimulation, to which they had, by long practice, disciplined themselves. However, they did not despair of teaching him this necessary artful quality by degrees, and the event showed that they were not wholly unsuccessful in their endeavors to do it.

While the war lasted, these simple provinces were of too much importance in the conduct of it, to be disgusted by any open attempt against their liberties. The junto, therefore, contented themselves with preparing their ground, by extending their connection and correspondencies in England, and by conciliating the friendship of the crown-officers occasionally here, and insinuating their designs as necessary to be undertaken in some future favorable opportunity, for the good of the empire, as well as of the colonies.

The designs of Providence are inscrutable. It affords conjunctures, favorable for their designs, to bad men, as well as to good. The conclusion of the peace was the most critical opportunity for our junto that could have presented. A peace, founded on the destruction of that system of

policy, the most glorious for the nation that ever was formed, and which was never equalled in the conduct of the English government, except in the interregnum, and perhaps in the reign of Elizabeth; which system, however, by its being abruptly broken off, and its chief conductor discarded before it was completed, proved unfortunate to the nation, by leaving it sinking in a bottomless gulf of debt, oppressed and borne down with taxes.

At this lucky time, when the British financier was driven out of his wits, for ways and means to supply the demands upon him, Bernard is employed by the junto, to suggest to him the project of taxing the colonies by act of parliament.

I do not advance this without evidence. I appeal to a publication made by Sir Francis Bernard himself, the last year, of his own Select Letters on the Trade and Government of America; and the Principles of Law and Polity applied to the American Colonies. I shall make use of this pamphlet before I have done.

In the year 1764, Mr. Bernard transmitted home to different noblemen and gentlemen, four copies of his Principles of Law and Polity, with a preface, which proves incontestably, that the project of new-regulating the American Colonies was not first suggested to him by the ministry, but by him to them. The words of this preface are these: “The present expectation, that a new regulation of the American governments will soon take place, probably arises more from the opinion the public has of the abilities of the present ministry, than from any thing that has transpired from the cabinet. It cannot be supposed that their penetration can overlook the necessity of such a regulation,

nor their public spirit fail to carry it into execution. But it may be a question, whether the present is a proper time for this work; more urgent business may stand before it; some preparatory steps may be required to precede it; but these will only serve to postpone. As we may expect that this reformation, like all others, will be opposed by powerful prejudices, it may not be amiss to reason with them at leisure, and endeavor to take off their force before they become opposed to government."

These are the words of that arch-enemy of North America, written in 1764, and then transmitted to four persons, with a desire that they might be communicated to others.

Upon these words, it is impossible not to observe: First, that the ministry had never signified to him any intention of new-regulating the colonies, and therefore, that it was he who most officiously and impertinently put them upon the pursuit of this *will-with-a-wisp*, which has led him and them into so much mire; secondly, the artful flattery with which he insinuates these projects into the minds of the ministry, as matters of absolute necessity, which their great penetration could not fail to discover, nor their great regard to the public omit; thirdly, the importunity with which he urges a speedy accomplishment of his pretended reformation of the governments; and, fourthly, his consciousness that these schemes would be opposed, although he affects to expect from powerful prejudices only, that opposition, which all Americans say, has been dictated by sound reason, true policy, and eternal justice. The last thing I shall take notice of is, the artful, yet most false and

wicked insinuation, that such new regulations were then generally expected. This is so absolutely false, that, excepting Bernard himself, and his junto, scarcely anybody on this side the water had any suspicion of it,—-insomuch that, if Bernard had made public, at that time, his preface and principles, as he sent them to the ministry, it is much to be doubted whether he could have lived in this country; certain it is, he would have had no friends in this province out of the junto.

The intention of the junto was, to procure a revenue to be raised in America by act of parliament. Nothing was further from their designs and wishes, than the drawing or sending this revenue into the exchequer in England, to be spent there in discharging the national debt, and lessening the burdens of the poor people there. They were more selfish. They chose to have the fingering of the money themselves. Their design was, that the money should be applied, first, in a large salary to the governor. This would gratify Bernard’s avarice; and then, it would render him and all other governors, not only independent of the people, but still more absolutely a slave to the will of the minister. They intended likewise a salary for the lieutenant-governor. This would appease in some degree the gnawings of Hutchinson’s avidity, in which he was not a whit behind Bernard himself. In the next place, they intended a salary to the judges of the common law, as well as admiralty. And thus, the whole government, executive and judicial, was to be rendered wholly independent of the people, (and their representatives rendered useless, insignificant, and even burthensome,) and absolutely dependent upon, and under

the direction of the will of the minister of state. They intended, further, to new-model the whole continent of North America; make an entire new division of it into distinct, though more extensive and less numerous colonies; to sweep away all the charters upon the continent with the destroying besom of an act of parliament; and reduce all the governments to the plan of the royal governments, with a nobility in each colony, not hereditary indeed at first, but for life. They did indeed flatter the ministry and people in England with distant hopes of a revenue from America, at some future period, to be appropriated to national uses there. But this was not to happen, in their minds, for some time. The governments must be new-modelled, newregulated, reformed, first, and then the governments here would be able and willing to carry into execution any acts of parliament, or measures of the ministry, for fleecing the people here, to pay debts, or support pensioners on the American establishment, or bribe electors or members of parliament, or any other purpose that a virtuous ministry could desire.

But, as ill luck would have it, the British financier was as selfish as themselves, and, instead of raising money for them, chose to raise it for himself. He put the cart before the horse. He chose to get the revenue into the exchequer, because he had hungry cormorants enough about him in England, whose cawings were more troublesome to his ears than the croaking of the ravens in America. And he thought, if America could afford any revenue at all, and he could get it by authority of parliament, he might have it himself, to give to his friends, as well as raise it for the junto here, to