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S P E E C H E S

OF THE

RIGHT HONOURABLE

RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN.

VOL. III.

THE
S P E E C H E S
OF THE
RIGHT HONOURABLE
RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN.

With a Sketch of his Life.

EDITED BY
A CONSTITUTIONAL FRIEND.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CONTENTS OF VOL III.

	Page
NOVEMBER, 27, 1795.—Treason and Sedition Bills	1
DECEMBER 3.—Treason and Sedition Bills	5
— 4.—Army Extraordinaries	20
— 7.—Loan.....	21
— 8.—Ways and Means	22
— 9.—Message from the King relative to a Negotiation with France....	24
— 10.—Treason and Sedition Bills.....	30
— 11.—Report of the High Price of Corn	33
— — — Libel on the Constitution	<i>ib.</i>
— 14.—Libel on the Constitution	34
— 15.—Libel on the Constitution	43
— — — Loan	44
FEBRUARY 21, 1796.—Vote of Credit Bill	47
— — — Expedition to the West Indies.....	48
— 26.—Mr. William Smith's Motion respecting the Loan	<i>ib.</i>
MARCH 16.—London Wet Dock Bill	50
— 20.—Maroon War in Jamaica.....	52
APRIL 13.—Papers Relative to the West India Expedition.....	53
— 18.— Letter of the Count de Sombreuil, with respect to the unfortunate Expedition to Quiberon	54
— — — Ways and Means	58
— 21.—West India Expedition	59
— 22.—Dog Tax Bill	70
— 25.—Dog Tax Bill	<i>ib.</i>
— 28.—West India Expedition	74
— 29.—Bill for abolishing Existing Game Laws.....	83
MAY 9.—Supply.—Foreign Corn	84
— — — Real Succession Tax Bill	<i>ib.</i>
— 10.—Wine Duty	85
— 13.—Real and Personal Succession Tax Bill	86
OCTOBER 18.—Invasion.—Augmentation of the Forces	89
NOVEMBER 1.—Bill for Augmenting the Militia	94
— 2.—Invasion.—Augmentation of the Forces	95
— — — Gamekeepers	99
— 3.—Gamekeepers	<i>ib.</i>
DECEMBER 14.—Mr. Fox's Motion of Censure on Ministers for Advancing Money to the Emperor without the Consent of Parliament	100
— 16.—General Fitzpatrick's Motion relative to General La Fayette, &c.	110
— 17.—Message from his Majesty	114

	Page
DECEMBER 22.—Bill for the Better Support and Maintenance of the Poor	117
FEBRUARY 27, 1797.—Stoppage of Cash Payments at the Bank	<i>ib.</i>
— — —Mr. Pitt's Poor Bill	122
— 28.—Stoppage of Cash Payments at the Bank	<i>ib.</i>
MARCH 1.—Stoppage of Cash Payments at the Bank	127
— 3.—Stoppage of Cash Payments at the Bank	130
— — —Thanks to Admiral Sir John Jervis	132
— 9.—Stoppage of Cash Payments at the Bank	134
— 10.—Public Debts	144
— — —Stoppage of Cash Payments at the Bank	147
— 13.—Mr. Harrison's Motion for the reduction of Useless Places	155
— 22.—Stoppage of Cash Payments at the Bank	161
— 24.—Stoppage of Cash Payments at the Bank	163
— 28.—General Defence of the Country	165
— 31.—Advances to the Emperor	166
APRIL 3.—Advances from the Bank to Government	167
— 4.—Advances to the Emperor	<i>ib.</i>
— 26.—Supply	185
MAY 8.—Mutiny of the Channel Fleet, and Augmentation of the Pay of the Navy	186
— 9.—Mutiny in the Channel Fleet, &c.	188
— 23.—Mutiny in the Navy	192
— 26.—Mutiny in the Navy	193
— — —Mr. Grey's Motion for a Reform in Parliament	196
— 30.—New Bank	203
JUNE 1.—Loan	205
— 2.—Mutiny in the Navy	207
DECEMBER 14.—Increased Assessment of Taxes	211
JANUARY 4, 1798.—Increased Assessment of Taxes	220
APRIL 4.—Bill for Preventing the Mischiefs arising from the Printing and Publishing of Newspapers by Persons Unknown, and for Regulating their Printing and Publication in other respects	237
APRIL 26.—Traitorous Correspondence and Preparation for Invasion	240
— — —Bill for Suspending for a limited time the Operation of the Habeas Corpus Act	252
MAY 5.—Southwark Association	255
JUNE 18.—State of Ireland	261
JANUARY 23, 1799.—Union of Ireland with Great Britain	270
— 31.—Union of Great Britain with Ireland	284
FEBRUARY 7.—Union of Great Britain with Ireland	297
— 11.—Union of Great Britain with Ireland	311
— 28.—Union between Ireland and Great Britain	322
MAY 21.—Cold-Bath Fields Prison.—Colonel Despard	325
FEBRUARY 10, 1800.—Helder Expedition	332
— 17.—Grant to the Emperor of Germany, &c., for the Loan to Foreign Powers	354
— 19.—Suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act	362
JUNE 10.—Bill for Punishing and Preventing Adultery	367
— 23.—Monastic Institution Bill	371
— 27.—Overtures from Buonaparte for Peace	377

CONTENTS.

vii

Page

DECEMBER 1.—Negotiation with France	387
MAY 14, 1802.—Definitive Treaty.....	405
— 24.—Bull Baiting.....	413
DECEMBER 8.—Army Estimates—War with France.....	417
FEBRUARY 23, 1803.—Prince of Wales's Establishment.....	431
MARCH 4.—Prince of Wales's Establishment.....	434
AUGUST 4.—Defence Amendment Bill.....	439
— 10.—Volunteers.....	442
MARCH 15, 1804.—State of the Naval Defence of the Country.....	459
JUNE 18.—Additional Force Bill.....	469
MARCH 6, 1805.—Additional Force Bill.....	477
MAY 13, 1806.—Repeal of Additional Force Bill.....	500
JULY 11.—Thanks to the Volunteers.....	504
FEBRUARY 20, 1807.—Westminster Election.....	508
MARCH 17.—Abolition of Slavery.....	511
— 18.—Westminster Election.....	513
AUGUST 7.—Third Reading of Irish Arms Bill.....	515
— 8.—Publicans' Bill.....	517
— 13.—State of Ireland.....	522
JUNE 15, 1808.—Affairs of Spain.....	543
— 17.—Carnatic Question.....	546

S P E E C H E S

OF THE

RIGHT HONOURABLE

RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN.

NOVEMBER 27, 1795.

TREASON AND SEDITION BILLS.

MR. SHERIDAN presented a petition from his own constituents, the inhabitants of Stafford, against the bills. He had a general recollection of their names, and, from the signatures, he was sure that the petition contained the general sense of the inhabitants.

Mr. Sheridan next presented a petition against the bill from the gentlemen and burgesses of Newcastle-under-Lyne, where the mayor was not averse to the petition, nor was there one person in the town dissenting from it. As the petition, therefore, passed unanimously, and both the representatives of the town were adverse to it, Mr. Sheridan said, the inhabitants had done him the honour to commit it to his care.

Mr. Sheridan next presented a petition against the bills, from a number of mechanics who had not an opportunity of signing the petition from the associated tradesmen. To those 15,000 names, therefore, might be added the 832 affixed to this petition. It came from the journeymen gun-makers, which of course, he said, the gentlemen on the opposite side would deem very alarming!

Sir John Frederick presented a petition from the clergy, freeholders, and inhabitants of the county of Surrey, signed by 200 persons.

Mr. Sheridan observed, that this petition was a strong censure upon the bills; for though the petitioners stated, that they understood some acts were at present under the consideration of

ings within the last few weeks, he was led to believe that his opponents were much more sanguine even than, he suspected, and that they were resolved to persevere. Upon the whole, however, the right hon. gentleman could not persuade himself to suppose that that house would call on any gentleman to enter upon such an important investigation stripped of the aid of his counsel ; and he could not help observing, that the attempt to take advantage of him in this instance, was not a very liberal return for the manner in which he gave way to the noble lord's motion upon a former occasion. But his manner of acting towards the noble lord and his friends in this transaction was that which, perhaps, few men would be ready to imitate.

Ayes 162 ; noes 12.

MARCH 17.

ABOLITION OF SLAVERY.

Lord Percy moved for leave to bring in a bill for the gradual abolition of slavery in the West Indies.

MR. SHERIDAN having anxiously expected that the bill passed the preceding night was the preamble of the ultimate measure of emancipation, thought he should be guilty of the grossest inconsistency in giving a silent vote on the present question. With these sentiments he need scarcely say, that the noble earl had his thanks for having directed the attention of the house to this important subject, even at that early period. The noble earl's statement had been misrepresented. He had never proposed to enfranchise the living negroes ; his measure, as he understood him, was to commence with infants born after a period, which would remain a matter of future parliamentary discussion. The planters were entitled to fair dealing on this subject. If the house meant to say, that by abolishing the slave trade they had done all that duty demanded, and that they would leave the emancipation of the slaves to the hazard of fortuitous circumstances, let them be explicit, and say so ; but if there lurked in any man's mind a secret desire to proceed in that business, a secret conviction that more ought to be done than had been done, it was unmanly, it was dishonourable, not to speak out. For one, he would boldly declare that he had farther views ; he hoped that the young nobleman who had done his feelings so much credit, by the proposition which he had that evening made, would

stand to his ground. If he persevered in the pursuit of his object with the same zeal as his right hon. friend opposite had done, he had no doubt that he would meet with the same success. An hon. baronet had talked of a cloven foot; he pleaded guilty to the cloven foot, but, of the man who expressed pleasure at the hope of seeing so large a portion of the human race freed from the shackles of tyranny, it should rather be said, that he displayed the pennon of an angel than the cloven foot of a demon. It was true no immediate connection existed between the abolition of the slave trade, and the abolition of slavery, but the same feelings must be roused by the consideration of both questions; and he who detested the one practice must also detest the other. He did not like to hear the term "property" applied to the subjects of a free country. Could man become the property of man? A colony emanating from the free constitution of England must carry with it the principles of that constitution, and could no more shake off its well known allegiance to the constitution than its allegiance to the sovereign. He trusted that the planters might be induced to lead the way on the subject of emancipation; but he cautioned the house against being sanguine on this subject. Were the planters themselves always resident on the islands, he should have greater hopes; but it was not probable that because cargoes of human misery were no longer to be landed on their shores, that because their eyes were to be no longer glutted with the sight of human suffering, or their ears pierced with the cries of human distraction, in any further importation of negroes, that the slave-drivers would soon forget their fixed habits of brutality, and learn to treat the unhappy wretches in their charge with clemency and compassion. Slavery would not wear itself out; it would become more rigid unless the legislature became more vigilant, and reminded the planters of the new duty that had fallen upon them, of rearing the young slaves in such a manner, that they might be worthy of freedom. Adverting to the quotation from Gibbon, he contended, that the slavery of the West Indies was unlike any other slavery; it was peculiarly unlike the slavery of ancient days, when the slaves frequently attained to the highest dignities; Æsop, Terence, and Seneca, were slaves. Was there a possibility that any of the unfortunate negroes in the West Indies should emulate such men? It might be dangerous to give freedom to the slaves in a mass,

but that it was not dangerous to give it to them in detail, was sufficiently proved by a little pamphlet that had been put into his hands the preceding night, in which it was stated, that a Mr. David Barclay, to his eternal honour be it spoken, who had himself been a slave-owner in Jamaica, and who, regretting that he had been so, on a bequest of slaves being made to him, emancipated them, caused them to be conveyed to Pennsylvania, where they were properly instructed, and where their subsequent exemplary conduct was the general theme of admiration. With this fact before him, should he be told that he must give up all hope of abolishing slavery ! No, he would never give it up. He would exclaim with the poet, in the words of the motto of the pamphlet which he had mentioned,

“ I would not have a slave to till my ground,
To fan me when I sleep, and tremble when
I wake, for all that human sinews, bought
And sold, have ever earn'd.”

Sir C. Pole moved that the house be counted, and only 35 members being present, it was adjourned.

MARCH 18.

WESTMINSTER ELECTION.

Lord H. Petty moved that the Westminster Petition be now taken into consideration.

MR. SHERIDAN rose and said, that he was aware that, standing in the situation he did, he was entitled to comment, to remark on, and to sum up all the evidence that had been adduced in support of the allegations contained in the petition now before the house ; he should, however, waive that right ; the evidence was in the hands of every member of that house, and he was not anxious, if he could do so, to add to the impression testimony of such a nature must have already produced ; he would content himself with one remark, which was, that that evidence, weak and futile as it was, did not say more to its own confusion than would have been proved by witnesses unimpeachable, which he (Mr. Sheridan), had the house thought it necessary, was ready to bring forward. As an instance, he should mention merely Mr. Weatherhead himself. When an inquiry was made as to his services in the navy, he confessed himself not quite satisfied with the return of the navy office. A noble lord (Folkestone)