

## Madden and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba

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*The writer, journalist and doctor Richard Robert Madden (1798-1886) represents the relationship of an honest Irish intellectual with Cuba. His contributions can be appreciated in two areas: culture and politics.*

Born in Dublin, he was the son of Edward Madden, a silk merchant, and his second wife, Elizabeth Forde. He pursued studies in medicine in Paris, Naples and London. Already at that time he demonstrated an inclination towards the humanities as a contributor to the *Morning Herald*. He exercised his profession for five years in Mayfair, London. In 1833, he was appointed special magistrate for Jamaica. He remained there for two years and undertook laudable work in promoting the emancipation of slaves. The British Government recognised his work and sent him to Cuba in 1836 as Superintendent of Free Africans and Executive Member of the Mixed Commission of Havana. His mission was to supervise the treatment of free black people by the Spanish authorities.

*'Although he was Catholic, Madden had the cold eloquence of the Puritans and a narrow yet passionate sense of justice; he was convinced that his mission was to fight not only against the trade and slavery in general, but also for the moral and material wellbeing of all Africans resident in Cuba, and particularly those who had been emancipated [...].'* (1)

Madden already enjoyed some renown as a man of letters and an abolitionist when he arrived in Havana. The success he had had in actions against the Jamaican slave-owners was known to the Havana intellectuals. In Cuba he undertook intense activity above and beyond the bureaucratic duties assigned to him. The economy of the island was sustained by slave labour. It is calculated that between 1790 and 1865, 467,288 Africans entered the island, even though the trade had been illegal since the year 1820.

From early on, friendships were formed between the Irishman and the intellectuals Domingo del Monte (1804-1853), Félix Manuel Tanco (1796-1871) and José de la Luz y Caballero (1804-1853). Relations with the latter, a philosopher and

educator of note, were so close that he was godfather to his son, who was baptised with the suggestive name of Thomas Moro.

José Martí has written that the lawyer, journalist, literary critic and writer Domingo del Monte was 'the most real and useful Cuban of his time'. On the basis of his contributions he is considered an indispensable figure in the study of the formation of Cuban nationality and culture. At the time that Madden settled in Havana, del Monte commenced his literary gatherings in the capital of the island. The Cuban '[...] lent him books and documents about the slave trade and he responded with an extensive questionnaire, useful and rich in responses that were loaded with statistics and historical data on the trade in Africans and about the life of slaves on the Island'. (2)

The participants in the literary gatherings promoted the abolitionist literary movement, which was influenced by Madden's ideas and principles. When he returned to England, he brought texts that denounced the slavery regime and illustrated the thoughts of young Cuban intellectuals. These were the manuscripts of the autobiography and poems of Juan Francisco Manzano; the *Elegías Cubanas* by Rafael Matamoros; *Francisco* by Anselmo Suárez and *Petrona y Rosalía* by Félix Tanco.

As soon as he arrived in London he began looking into publishing these works. He managed to get *Poems by a slave in the island of Cuba* published in Liverpool in 1840. This contained Manzano's texts, verses by other poets and the responses by Domingo del Monte to the questionnaire that he had undertaken on slavery.

With the publication of the autobiography, Madden brought to light an exceptional testimony: the vision of the victim, as Manzano (1797-1854) had himself been a slave.

### The Amistad Affair

The hijacking of the ship *La Amistad* by a group of slaves constituted a spectacular feat, and has been the inspiration of authors and filmmakers. Madden's participation in the judgement of the hijackers was decisive. We will see here in summarised form how events transpired.

On 28 June 1839, a cargo of 53 slaves departed from Havana on the ship *La Amistad*, headed for Príncipe Port. During the transport of the slaves, under the leadership of the young Sengbe Pieh, popularly known in United States history as Joseph Cinque, mutinied. They killed the captain and the cook. They took charge of the ship and attempted to navigate it towards Africa, but they ended up on the northern coast of Long Island, New York, where they were detained.

Imprisoned, the Africans were accused of murder and piracy. The rigged judicial process began. Various plaintiffs presented in favour, claiming possession of the merchandise of the ship: the Spanish Crown, the North American Secretary of State, the Cuban traders and a group of abolitionists.

During the month of August, the North American press gave much space to the story of the hijackers and the judgment to which they were subject. At that time Madden was organising his return to England. Nevertheless, his love for the liberty of slaves meant that he postponed the journey. He embarked immediately for New York and declared that the accused had been bought at illegal markets and that the trade documents were false. He also revealed the complicity of the Spanish Government, which received ten dollars for each slave imported to Cuba. In the end, the mutineers were freed and taken to Africa. (3)

Madden's attitude at the court case exacerbated his tense relationship with the Spanish

### Notes

1 Juan Pérez de la Riva, *Correspondencia reservada del capitán general Don Miguel de Tacón. 1834-1836* (Havana: Biblioteca Nacional José Martí, 1963), 322-3.

2 Urbano Martínez, *Domingo del Monte y su tiempo* (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1997), 260.

authorities and in 1840 he was, to all intents and purposes, expelled from the country (4), but his work had contributed to planting seeds that germinated on 10 October 1868, the date that marked the beginning of the first Cuban war of independence.

### The Island of Cuba

When he returned to England, Madden also took with him, together with the manuscripts of the Cuban authors mentioned above, his own notes, where he relates his observations on the reality of the largest of the Antilles. Based on these testimonies by 'people without history' (slaves, farm managers, factory-owners, etc.) and on data from Cuban and European historians, he prepared the volume *The Island of Cuba*, in which he describes, as the subtitle sets out, its resources, progress and perspectives.

This is a work that, thanks to the economic and demographic data that it provides – data that are very useful for anyone interested in colonial history –, presents us with first-hand information about the daily life of the sugar producers. In very direct language, the narrator denounces the abuses that the slaves were subject to: physical punishment, poor nutrition and excessively long working days.

Madden completed the task given to him by the British Government as Superintendent of Free Africans and Executive Member of the Mixed Commission of Havana in an outstanding fashion. Through reports, legal actions, a book and the stimulation of the creators of the nascent abolitionist literature, he influenced anti-slavery ideology and left an enduring mark on the history of Cuba.

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3 [www.famousamericans.net/richardrobertmadden](http://www.famousamericans.net/richardrobertmadden), accessed 15 November 2007 and Richard R. Madden, *Op. cit.*, 255-71.

4 After his departure from Cuba, Madden was Special Commissioner of the British Government in the British colonies in Africa and Colonial Secretary of Western Australia. He continued to cultivate his journalism and wrote literary works. From 1848, he lived in Ireland, where he retired from public service in order to dedicate himself to the defence of poor farmers.

