

Richard Robert Madden: an Irish anti-slavery activist in the Americas

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Today R.R. Madden is remembered as an influential historian who shaped the popular consciousness. First published in 1842, his *United Irishmen, Their Lives and Times*, continued to make frequent and varied appearances over the next eighty years, extended, reorganised, pirated and abbreviated.¹ By the twentieth century its style and construction increasingly limited its appeal for the general reader, but it remained a rich quarry for the historian. Madden saw the '98 as 'the great Morgue of talent and enthusiasm',² a view reverberating through to the bi-centenary commemoration. It is not however generally remembered that this book was produced by an Irish emigrant earning his living as a writer and imperial official. The following essay will examine the nature of R.R. Madden's work as an anti-slavery activist and seek to explain the connection between such a career and his emergence as a nationalist historian.

In 1820, following an eighteenth-century pattern, R.R. Madden, twenty-one-year-old son of a Catholic silk manufacture and possessor of £30 capital, left Dublin for Bordeaux to seek his fortune. After travelling on the continent, he moved to London, where he worked as a newspaper reporter, attained a medical qualification from the College of Surgeons and acquired an ambition which was to remain with him the rest of his life: to become a successful literary figure. In 1824, having considered his own aptitudes and experience and the current taste of the reading public, he set out for the East returning in 1828 with a travel book and a two volume novel, *The Mussulman*, which he sold for £300 each, a substantial amount for a first-time author. He married, set up practice in a promisingly fashionable area and in 1829 joined the burgeoning Anti-slavery Society.³

Anti-slavery, like Catholic emancipation, had first emerged in dynamic public

1 R.R. Madden, *The United Irishmen, their Lives and Times*, 2 vols (London, 1842); 2 vols (Philadelphia, 1842); 2 vols (London, 1843); 3 vols (Dublin, 1846); 3 vols (Dublin, 1858); *Address to the People of England on the Orange Regime in Ireland . . . reprinted from 'The United Irishmen, their Lives and Times'* (London, 1861); J.B. Daly (ed.), *Ireland in 98: Sketches of the principal men of the time, based upon the published volumes and some unpublished MSS of the late Dr. R.R. Madden* (London, 1888); V.F. O'Reilly (ed.), *The United Irishmen, their Lives and Times by R.R. Madden* (New York, 1910), reprinted 1916; J.J. O'Neill (ed.), *The United Irishmen, their Lives and Times by R.R. Madden* (Dublin, 1920). 2 R.R. Madden to Sir William Napier, 28 Aug. 1842, in T.M. Madden, *Memoirs from 1798-1886 of Richard Robert Madden* (London, 1891), p. 169. 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 60-2.

form at the close of the eighteenth century, fed by enlightenment ideas and revolutionary hopes. But the connection of anti-slavery with growing evangelical enthusiasm in Britain, allowed that reform to prosper in a counter-revolutionary age. Thus 1806–7 saw the triumph of the campaign against the slave trade and in the 1820s the revived movement turned on slavery itself. As a cause seeking to cultivate the conscience and sensitivity of mankind, anti-slavery had always appealed to and welcomed literary people, making extensive use of their talents. Madden was therefore a valuable recruit and in 1833 when the reformed parliament abolished slavery within the British empire, he secured an official post as a stipendiary magistrate in Jamaica at £300 a year.

Madden was eager to escape from the strains of attempting to establish a fashionable practice and he would never again earn his living as a doctor. He was a man who thrived on supporting a cause and saw the literary and historic potential of being present to record the beginnings of slave freedom, this 'mighty experiment'⁴ as Lord Stanley, the Whig colonial secretary, had described it. But more personal reasons excited Madden's interest in Jamaica for he himself had possessed planter relatives, the Lyons of Roscommon. There was nothing particularly unusual about this. Throughout the eighteenth century Ireland's western gentry, Protestant and Catholic, Brownes, Kellys, Stauntons, O'Haras, Martins, Blakes, Frenchs, Lynchs, Tuites, and Bellews had invested in sugar estates. The Lyons plantations had been purchased in the 1780s when the granting of 'free trade' unleashed a spurt of enthusiasm in Ireland for West Indian ventures. Then Madden's maternal great uncle, always referred to as 'old Dr Lyons', appears to have developed two Jamaican plantations, Derry and Marly. Eventually he sold Derry and retired to Ireland, while the remaining, Marly, was managed and later inherited in succession by his brother, Theodosius Lyons, and his nephew, Garret Forde, who both died in Jamaica. (Garret Forde was R.R. Madden's mother's favourite brother.) Sometime in the first decade of the nineteenth century the Lyons plantation became absentee and eventually the subject of a long running chancery suit. Legal developments and a timely death in the early 30s, convinced Madden that now might be the moment to put in a claim of his own.⁵ The Jamaican appointment gave him the opportunity to personally assess whether there was any future in embarking on the hazards of litigation. When eventually he reconnoitred Marly, early in 1834, he found it inaccessible and 'ruinate,' the sugar machinery all sold off years before, a dilapidated house inhabited only by what he at first took to be slaves abandoned due to age and illness. However, on closer investigation, it turned out that two of the women, a decade or so older than himself, were his cousins, the daughters of Mr Theodosius Lyons by his mulatto concubine. She was still alive, now very old-

⁴ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, third series, xvii, p. 1194. ⁵ Madden, *Memoirs* p. 68. Marly had been mortgaged and then sold by the Irish Court of chancery, c.1824. Madden seems to have envisaged making a claim on the current owners rather than actually acquiring the property.

erly and very suspicious at the appearance of Richard Robert. The two younger women were more informative, explaining that Madden could also have met a male cousin but he had been auctioned off in one of the court of chancery sales. On seeing the ruinate plantation, Madden perceived its hopelessness as a financial asset and its potential as literary copy. In his book on the West Indies his Jamaican family became a symbol of planterdom, drawn by the nature of the system into absenteeism, litigation and debt, leaving nothing behind but unacknowledged children, the remnants of an embittered and exploited work force and the forgotten grave of uncle Garret now sprouting someone else's sugar cane.⁶

It was relatively easy for R.R. Madden to turn from his old profession of travel writing to producing anti-slavery literature. But the job as stipendiary magistrate was a different matter: here he had no previous experience to draw upon and the remit in itself was daunting. He and his colleagues were stepping straight into the front line of a long-running quarrel. Since 1823 the government, under pressure from the anti-slavery lobby in parliament, had laid down an improved code of practice for the treatment of slaves. The planters were furious at the attempt to introduce these new metropolitan standards, humanitarian and evangelical, into their traditional plantation society, protesting that their rights as colonists and as property owners were being violated. Here Jamaica, the largest British island, with a forty-five man strong legislature, in existence since the mid-seventeenth century, was very much the leader of the protest. Reacting to disagreement among their rulers, the slaves rose in revolt at the very moment when the struggle for parliamentary reform in Britain was strengthening the electoral importance of the anti-slavery movement.⁷ Under such pressures the Whigs moved unenthusiastically from amelioration to abolition, producing a compromise solution. The planters were to be given £20 million compensation and their work force was to be secured by a period of apprenticeship during which the ex-slaves would labour for their former owners without pay. Colonial secretary Stanley stressed that apprenticeship was to train the ex-slaves for freedom, while giving the planters time to adjust financially to new conditions.⁸ The stipendiary magistrates were appointed to police apprenticeship and ensure that it worked fairly. On arrival in the West Indies they had to explain freedom to ex-slaves, who were going to have to remain on the plantations and work for their masters without remuneration, forty and a half hours a week for the next six years. Failure to carry out this labour would be punished by extra labour, discipline to be enforced if necessary by flogging (in the case of male apprentices) and imprisonment in the work house for all, regardless of gender. Erring overseers, agents and masters would be dealt with by fines, dismissal from post or a ban against holding apprentices. Hostile to the introduction of this new paid magistracy, the planters received the unwelcome newcomers with lavish

6 R.R. Madden, *A Twelvemonth's Residence in the West Indies during the Transition from Slavery to Apprenticeship*, 2 vols (London, 1835), i, pp. 160–71. 7 W.A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 111–15. 8 *Hansard*, xvii, p. 1230.

colonial hospitality, while making it clear that difficulties would ensue if suitable co-operation did not follow.⁹

Thirty special magistrates took up positions in Jamaica in 1833–4. By the close of the year four of them had died, probably from yellow fever, and another four had given up their commissions and left.¹⁰ Madden was one of the first to reach the island. He arrived some nine months before the Jamaican assembly, driven by the threat of loss of compensation, passed the hated abolition bill in August 1834. During those nine months Madden acted as an ordinary magistrate in St Andrew's parish in order to train for his future role. He got on well with the other special magistrates; most of whom were ex-naval or army officers, the kind of men he had met on shipboard during his eastern travels, and, like himself, professional, penurious, hanging on determinedly to their middle-class status. He set himself to learning Jamaican Creole so that he could understand what the slaves were saying.¹¹ When delivering judgement he sought to act fairly while displaying his concern for the maintenance of law and order.¹² He enjoyed planter hospitality, travelled round the island taking notes on everything of interest, including flora and fauna, for the book he planned to write was designed to appeal to his old audience, the armchair traveller, as well as to those concerned with the issue of slavery.

When it came time for him to take up his special magistracy he was moved from St Andrew's parish to Kingston. This meant that Madden was dealing with people who had been urban slaves, working as household servants, artisans, dockers and sailors. Many of the city's white households were economically dependent on such labour: spinsters, widows and retired people often lived by hiring out their slaves. Yet urban slavery, a condition for which the Caribbean institution had not been designed, had always presented severe problems of control, providing a high level of opportunity for private trading, theft, alternative employment, acquisition of literacy, scanting on set duties, even permanent escape.

Despite the obvious difficulties, Madden set about his task with enthusiasm. The cases brought before him fell mainly into two categories: complaints by masters against absconding apprentices and requests by apprentices for immediate manumission. In the first instance, Madden soon proved himself unsatisfactory to the white community. When he convicted apprentices for breach of labour dues and ill discipline he kept the sentences of flogging to a minimum. Frustrated masters, forbidden by law to whip recalcitrant apprentices and disappointed that Madden was not going to do it for them, extracted corporal punishment by manhandling their servants before him, under the pretext that they had to be physically forced to attend court. Madden refused to hear cases under such circumstances.¹³ On the issue of manumission he preserved an equally determined front. The

9 'Report from Select Committees appointed to inquire into the makings of the Apprenticeship System in the Colonies with minutes and evidence' in *British Parliamentary Papers* (Shannon, 1968), *Slave Trade*, iii, p. 360. 10 Madden, *West Indies*, ii, p. 266. 11 *Ibid.*, i, p. 129. 12 *Ibid.*, ii, p. 104. 13 *Ibid.*, ii, pp. 310–12.

Westminster government was eager to encourage this, seeing it as a school for wage labourers, suggesting that apprentices should exert themselves to earn money to buy immediate freedom. In setting the price of manumission, the special magistrate had to work with a regular magistrate and disagreements between the two, as Madden soon realised, could mean the complete failure of the apprentice's request. There were other cases of course in which the apprentice claimed that the original enslavement had been illegal so that free status should be immediately recognised. Madden actually encouraged applications on such grounds when he discovered that Jamaica contained Indians from the Mosquito coast enslaved by tradition not by law. In all, during his magistracy Madden received some three hundred applications for manumission of which eighty were carried through successfully, a success rate which proved to be dangerously high.¹⁴ Once the pattern of his behaviour emerged he found himself harassed by the Kingston authorities, his office removed from the spacious court house into the squalor of an abandoned store. When he was assaulted in the street by an angry merchant and the police ignored his complaints, Madden decided that the protection of the apprentice was incompatible with his own personal safety and resigned his appointment.¹⁵

Giving up the magistracy, however, did not mean giving up anti-slavery activity. His book was ready for the press and published in Philadelphia, as well as London, lent strength to the American campaign to create a national anti-slavery society in the U.S.A. based on the British example.¹⁶ Like all his writings, *A Twelvemonth's Residence in the West Indies* was a sprawling, verbose work but it included passages which were lively, perceptive, at times compelling. As a travel writer Madden had acquired skills enabling him to penetrate a strange society quickly. One of the most fruitful was his device of seeking out members of the medical profession. In Jamaica this led him to an elderly black doctor, whose repute as a healer under enslavement, had enabled him to earn enough to purchase his freedom and set up his own practice. In turn, the doctor introduced his friend, an intellectual and Islamic scholar who now, encouraged by Madden, wrote an account of his life and kidnapping in Africa and sent a letter home for the first time in thirty years.¹⁷ Or again, drawing on his experiences as a magistrate, he revealed the struggles of Presant Pike, purchased as a child from a slave ship, working after her master's death to support his two children in England and, on their deaths, passed from trustee to trustee, to whom she handed over her wages, while she herself produced eleven children (seven dying in infancy, one of the remaining four sold by a trustee for £90). She then negotiated an agreement to buy herself and

14 'Select Committee' in *Parliamentary Papers*, p. 67. **15** Madden, *West Indies*, ii, pp. 13–16.

16 Madden's *A Twelvemonth's Residence in the West Indies* was published in Philadelphia in 1835, by Carey, Lea and Blanchard, who also published *The United Irishmen* in 1842; R.W. Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: the Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (London, 1991), pp. 265–7. **17** Madden, *West Indies*, i, pp. 99–101; ii, pp. 183–9.

three children by instalments for £180. She had paid over £76 13s. 4d. ('I have all my receipts to show') for her personal manumission when apprenticeship arrived and the consequent legal investigations revealed that her children had no legal owner. Nevertheless, the trustees insisted that she should complete her payments as previously arranged so she wrote to the stipendiary magistrate asking him to confirm her family's freedom and, if possible, save her £103 6s. 8d.¹⁸ Thus, through Madden's pen, the chained and kneeling African, the symbol of anti-slavery since 1787, was transformed into a series of real individuals ready and eager to enrich the nineteenth-century liberal world with their talents and endeavours as free citizens. A book, which had opened with wry musings on travellers' troubles and plaudits to planter hospitality, mounted into moral intensity and bitter condemnation of colonists who opposed the reforming intent of the imperial government.¹⁹ In *A Twelvemonth's Residence in the West Indies* Madden served his apprenticeship and emerged a radical anti-slavery activist.

In his book and in a letter to the Colonial Office, he denounced apprenticeship as an unjust and unworkable system, which should be demolished immediately.²⁰ This confirmed the suspicions of many anti-slavery enthusiasts who had fought against the introduction of the institution in the first place. In an effort to silence growing criticism the government appointed a parliamentary committee to inquire into the working of the system at its most controversial – in Jamaica. Madden was called as a witness and, along with a number of more experienced colonial officials, supported its immediate ending. Opposed to the view of the officials was that of the proprietors and planters, who reported that after some initial confusions while the special magistrates settled into the job and the apprentices came to understand the true nature of the new system, it was working well. This was the finding which the government wanted to hear and which, on the whole, the Committee was prepared to endorse. But there was one failing which the Committee felt must be addressed. Conceived in the age of the 'Reform of Manners', and the definition of society as sharply gendered into separate spheres, anti-slavery had always drawn strength from the special position of women. Shocking revelations about the cruelties and 'improprieties' perpetrated against female slaves had attracted many to the cause and in 1823 the Westminster government had sought to ban the flogging of females. Now it appeared that, in the workhouse, apprentices lagging on the treadmill were flogged to make them amend their pace and that such groups included women.²¹ On this emotive issue the government agreed to act, eventually producing a bill which removed the operation of Jamaican workhouses from local government control. The planters reacted with fury at this latest attempt to undermine their power over their workforce and the island's institutions. In a bid to emancipate themselves from

¹⁸ Royal Irish Academy (RIA), Madden Papers, MS. 24. o. 11, fol. 233–7, To their Honours, the Special Magistrates, R.R. Madden etc. for the freedom of slaves. ¹⁹ Madden, *West Indies*, ii, p. 296. ²⁰ 'Select Committee' in *Parliamentary Papers*, p. 49. ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

Westminster's surveillance, they passed a motion through the assembly abolishing apprenticeship.²² Thus the radical wing of the anti-slavery cause, in which Madden had placed himself, triumphed. Apprenticeship ended two years early in 1838.

Anti-slavery was politically in the ascendant and with it Madden's reputation and career. In 1836 he was appointed to a new post, at the cutting edge of anti-slavery activity, as the first Commissioner for Liberated Africans in Cuba. At £800 a year it was much better paid than his Jamaican magistracy, while a temporary appointment as a judge on the Court of Mixed Commission in Havana brought his emoluments up to £1000.²³ Both posts were connected with the suppression of the international slave trade. When parliament banned the slave trade in 1806-7, the opponents of this measure had argued that, if Britain did so, other countries would simply expand their trading activities and replace her. This proved to be true. At the Congress of Vienna, Britain tried and failed to obtain support for an international ban. She then resorted to trying to make bilateral treaties with individual countries which committed them to banning their trade and allowing the British navy rights of search, should her West Africa squadron suspect their ships of slaving. The only countries prepared to take up such an ignominious position were those in need of Britain's friendship. Spain fell into this category, but her situation was complicated by the fact that her richest colony Cuba, on which the crown increasingly depended for revenue, was expanding its plantation system and was hungry for slaves. The Spanish solution was to sign the treaties that Britain proposed and then make no effort to fulfil them. In 1835, fifteen years after Spain had first signed a treaty completely renouncing the trade, Palmerston, who had become the watchdog of the anti-slavery lobby, pressed her into signing another more rigorously detailed version. Madden therefore arrived in Havana at a time when the anti-slavery lobby was hoping for a more aggressive policy towards illegal slaving. His post as protector of the liberated Africans meant that he had to supervise the future of Africans rescued from slave ships caught off the Cuban coast. There were no arrangements, of course, for those so liberated to be returned to their homelands, but under the new treaty Madden was to see that they were sent to the British colonies to serve as indentured labourers. The authorities in Cuba reacted with horror when they discovered that the new official was an abolitionist and did everything they could to hamper his activities, while, in return, Madden denounced them as hopelessly corrupt.²⁴ His experience on the Court of Mixed Commission reinforced this belief. Here he judged whether apprehended vessels were guilty of slaving, yet he knew that ships were successfully landing cargoes of slaves in the island's many inlets, or even sailing into Havana with forged papers,

²² Alan Burns, *History of the British West Indies* (2nd ed., New York, 1965), p. 641. ²³ Leon Ó Broin, 'R.R. Madden, Historian of the United Irishmen,' in *Irish University Review*, 2: 1, Spring 1972, p. 21. ²⁴ D.R. Murray, 'Richard Robert Madden: His Career as a Slavery Abolitionist' in *Studies: an Irish Quarterly Review of Letters, Philosophy and Science*, 61 (1972), pp. 48-50.

saying they were carrying plantation slaves from one part of Cuba to another. Once illegally imported Africans set foot on Cuban ground they were unfree, the Court of Mixed Commission could do nothing for them, as its powers applied only to those taken on captured vessels. The Cubans themselves resenting British interference with their commerce, set up the slave barracoons beside the British Consulate.²⁵

As he came to know the island better Madden found himself both horrified and excited by Cuba. Here he discovered an intellectual and revolutionary life which he had not encountered in Jamaica. Below the Spanish administration was a Creole society, hankering after independence, inhibited from action by fear of slave revolt. But Madden felt he could discern groups ready to turn to rebellion if encouraged by promises of British aid. There were free coloureds, politically aware and frustrated by their restriction to artisan activities, and even a select group of rich and intellectual planters, critical of slavery, who encouraged a salon of young writers in the production of anti-slavery novels.²⁶ Among these was a poet and recently manumitted slave, Manzano, who produced the colony's first slave narrative, a genre which was currently taking anti-slavery circles in the U.S.A by storm. Madden translated Manzano's work into English and later in London arranged for its publication.²⁷ While on the island he continually pressed Palmerston to promise Cuba protection if she broke with Spain, co-operated in the banning of the slave trade, and introduced measures to ameliorate slavery.²⁸ The policy of encouraging anti-Spanish revolt was too forward even for the robust and ambitious Palmerston. But though the Foreign Office rejected his advice Madden passed on his ideas and personal contacts to the Glaswegian, David Turnbull, a free-booting, anti-slavery activist who had turned up in Cuba on a fact finding mission. Turnbull would later become British consul in Havana, a development which the Spanish authorities claimed had dire consequences. In 1843 several slave revolts broke out in Cuba and in 1844 the government claimed to have unmasked a widespread revolutionary conspiracy, La Escalera, led by the free coloured population and incited by British abolitionists, a conspiracy which they suppressed with torture, banishment and executions and the removal of Turnbull from the British consulate.²⁹ Whether or not the conspiracy was a real threat or an over-reaction by government (and today historians still argue bitterly over this issue) the violence of those years was the outcome of a slave society under abolitionist pressure. As in Jamaica in 1831, the existence of the anti-slavery movement encouraged hopes of freedom among the slaves and fear of resistance among their owners.

25 R.L. Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empire over Slavery in Cuba* (Connecticut, 1988), p. 36, 149. 26 *Ibid.*, p. 100. 27 J.F. Manzano, *Poems by a Slave on the Island of Cuba, translated from the Spanish by R.R. Madden with the History of the Early Life of the Negro Poet written by Himself* (London, 1840). 28 R.R. Madden, *Island of Cuba* (London, 1853), p. 84. 29 Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, pp. 138-53.

In 1839 Madden requested and received permission to return home on furlough but on this trip he was able to score another anti-slavery success, which reinforced his personal standing and increased the unease of Spanish slave traders and Cuban slave holders at the international forces gathering against them. Madden travelled by way of the United States, where he was met by the New York business man, Lewis Tappan, one of America's wealthiest and most prominent anti-slavery figures. Tappan had arranged that Madden should appear as a witness in the *Amistad* case. This case, now a Stephen Spielberg film, was in its own time a *cause célèbre*. A group of some forty-nine slaves on a Cuban vessel, the *Amistad*, had risen in revolt, taken over the ship and, in their attempt to sail back to Africa, had mistakenly landed in Connecticut. Arrested by the authorities and brought to trial, the Spanish claimed them as slaves from a Cuban plantation who had mutinied when they were being moved by sea from one part of the island to another. Madden appeared in court to provide telling evidence that the forty-nine were Africans being illegally imported by slavers.³⁰ Internal U.S. politics meant that it was some time before the legal wrangling resulted in the freeing of the *Amistad* captives, but the publicity given to Madden raised his profile in America and Britain.

Madden returned to London to take part, as the Cuban expert, in the first international Anti-slavery Convention in 1840. Over the past decades Spanish slavery had achieved a degree of sympathetic comment in Britain – like other Catholic colonies Cuba had a tradition of converting her slaves and a well-established system of manumission supervised by government functionaries. Madden denounced all this as a façade. Visitors to the island saw only the acceptable face of slavery, as they enjoyed planter hospitality in the attractive colonial towns and great houses of the wealthy, served by well-dressed slave servants apparently reared in a familial atmosphere. Behind this lay the horror of the swiftly expanding sugar plantations where newly imported Africans were subjected to brutal discipline and frequently worked to death.³¹ Madden was an emotional man, both his sympathy and his temper were quick. A speedy and copious collector of evidence, he sometimes mixed hearsay with actual observation, but in the case of apprenticeship and Cuban slavery historical research has confirmed his conclusions. The role of apprenticeship in British emancipation was problematic rather than positive, while wide-ranging statistical studies have shown that regardless of the government or society involved, the worst slave conditions (highest death rate, lowest birth rate) existed on newly established sugar plantations, where the hard work required and the enormous profits to be made from cropping fresh soil encouraged continuous restocking and expansion of the work force.³²

³⁰ Howard Jones, *Mutiny on the Amistad: the Saga of a Slave Revolt and its Impact on American Abolition, Law and Diplomacy* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 99–110. ³¹ R.R. Madden, *Address on Slavery in Cuba presented to the General Anti-Slavery Convention* (London, 1840), pp. 1–31.

³² Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract*, p. 128, 132; R.B. Sheridan, "Sweet Malefactor": the Social Costs of Slavery in Jamaica and Cuba, 1807–54' in *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser.: 29, May (1976) pp. 239–44.

At the anti-slavery convention Madden stressed the vital importance of continued international attack upon the trade in order to prevent the worst excesses of Cuban slavery. Increasingly by 1840 anti-slavery leaders in Britain were considering focusing their main emphasis not on ocean-wide arrest, which had proved so difficult, but on internal conditions in Africa, the source of the still-flourishing trade.³³ Madden could have returned to Cuba, but instead he accepted an appointment as Special Commissioner of Inquiry into the Administration of the British Settlements on the West Coast of Africa. Such a role seemed to fit well with his trouble-shooting reputation and fondness for tackling politically prominent issues. But this time everything went wrong, he took sick, almost died, saw very little of the areas he had been sent to investigate and returned home to find a Conservative government in office. Much less sympathetic to the anti-slavery lobby than the Whigs, the Conservatives disliked his report and offered him no further employment. His African post had paid him over £1000 a year, now he found himself dependent on journalism earning some £200 a year as special correspondent for the *Morning Chronicle* in Portugal.³⁴ The return of the Whigs to office in 1847 restored him to an official position, but anti-slavery had gone into decline, no longer expanding its official remit and bristling with assignments offering popular copy. So Madden became Secretary to the Colonial government of Western Australia where he spent only nine months beset by the problems of Aborigines and Orangemen. News that his nineteen-year-old son had been drowned while working as an engineer on the Shannon finally clinched his decision to return home.³⁵ His career, though varied and at times dramatic, was not what he had hoped for; literary fame in London and a prestigious administrative appointment abroad had eluded him. Eventually he succeeded in exchanging his Australian post with the Secretary to the Loan Fund in Dublin and, at the age of 51, settled down to live in Ireland after a thirty-year absence.³⁶

The *United Irishmen* grew out of Madden's anti-slavery years; on occasion he attributed it to his anti-slavery experience.³⁷ By the time he left for Jamaica in 1833 he had experimented with a wide variety of literary forms, poetry, prose, fiction, non-fiction, but he had not considered becoming a historian. In 1834–5, resuming his role as a travel writer eager for copy, he had chosen to journey from Jamaica to London by way of the North American mainland, speedily covering ground from Philadelphia to Canada, seeking out and interviewing important and interesting figures – anti-slavery supporters, theatre people, medical men, prominent Irish emigrants. Of all those whom he encountered, the most hospitable were Ireland's political exiles or their descendants. The elderly William MacNeven, by now the

33 Howard Temperley, *White Dreams, Black Africa: the Anti-slavery expedition to the Niger 1841–2* (London, 1991) pp. 1–40. 34 RIA, Madden Papers, MS. 24.0.9, fol. 129–41, R.R. Madden to Sir James Stephen, 5 Dec. 1843. 35 Madden, *Memoirs*, p. 227. 36 Ó Broin, 'Historian of the United Irishmen,' p. 30. 37 R.R. Madden to Sir William Napier, 28 Aug. 1842 in Madden, *Memoirs*, p. 170 and Madden, *United Irishmen* (1846), i, p. 4.

sole survivor of the United Irishmen, proved particularly congenial as a doctor, a Catholic, and an intelligent commentator on anti-slavery. Back in 1807 MacNeven had published his own account of events leading up to '98 and he now encouraged Madden to become the historian of the United Irishmen.³⁸ After his return to London, Madden did visit Ireland for the first time in many years, more in the role of emigrant made good than historical researcher, but subsequent American experiences continued to kindle his nationalist feelings. Sailing from Liverpool via New York to take up his Cuban appointment, he discovered that most of the two hundred steerage passengers were Irish from the Farnham estate in Cavan, where the improving, evangelical landlord preferred Protestant tenants. He recorded that his blood boiled on hearing men say that they had been evicted because they were Catholics.³⁹ Once settled in Cuba, he sent back to Dublin for books and papers to enable him to start work on *The United Irishmen*.⁴⁰ By now other influences were causing him to contemplate his past. Despite the fact that he felt the church in Cuba was as much in need of reform as the slave system, the experience of living in a Catholic country revived his religious sensitivities. In the 1820s and early 30s Madden had been very much the liberal rationalist, marrying a Protestant and thinking little about his own personal faith. This had enabled him to work easily with the evangelicals who formed the back bone of the anti-slavery movement, but now he began to find their missionaries, whom he had formerly accepted as simple, good hearted men, as fanatical and importunate, pressurising him, as a British official, to gain admission from the Spanish authorities for bibles, which the church condemned as heretical. Conscience stricken and worried he wrote to the Catholic archbishop of Dublin suggesting that Ireland should launch a missionary initiative and supply the bible in the vernacular to Catholic colonies.⁴¹ The difficulties of being a pious Catholic in a strongly evangelical Protestant movement increasingly crowded in on Madden. Yet most painful of all for him was the attitude of the Irish emigrants in America to anti-slavery and the Negro. The new arrivals from Ireland, who flooded into the worst jobs in the northern cities of the United States in the 1820s and 30s, were eager to take the advantages a white skin conferred and to boost membership of a party designed to protect the interests of northern labour and southern slavery. Committed to anti-slavery, growing in nationalist and Catholic ardour, Madden was 'surprized and shocked' to see his fellow countrymen showing no sympathy for a people suffering under a state apparatus which made them strangers in the land of their birth. So in 1840 when Madden lectured in London to reveal the horrors of Cuban slavery, he spoke in

³⁸ Madden, *Memoirs*, pp. 86–99; William MacNeven, *Pieces of Irish History* (New York, 1807); Ó Broin, 'Historian of the United Irishmen', p. 23. ³⁹ RIA, Madden Papers, MS. 24.0.9, fol. 377–93, Madden to William Murphy, Sept. 1836. ⁴⁰ Leon Ó Broin, *An Maidíneach: Staráí na nÉirennach Aontaithe* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1971) p. 87. ⁴¹ *Ibid.* pp. 108–15; RIA, Madden Papers, MS. 24.0.9, fols. 451–63, Madden to Dr Wilely, 4 March, 1838; fols 43–50, Madden to Revd G. Thompson, 8 May 1838.

Dublin calling upon the Catholic church to educate 'the lower orders of our countrymen' to understand the incompatibility of slavery and Christianity so that, as emigrants to America, they would put their 'extraordinary' political power to 'beneficial' use and support the anti-slavery cause.⁴² Though it proved a formative force on his life, Madden did not like the United States, seeing it as undermining much that was best in the Irish character, love of family, love of God and causing his transplanted countrymen to reject the principles of the United Irishmen.⁴³

Schooled as an anti-slavery activist Madden believed that good government was to be achieved through the exertion of a moral public opinion, the product of enlightened and educated reformers, for he was a liberal not a democrat.⁴⁴ This was how British anti-slavery had achieved its triumph and he saw the United Irishmen in the same light. Reformers who sought to bring just government to their country, they had successfully created a moral public opinion in Ireland only to have it flouted by a corrupt government, which drove them into rebellion, amply aided by a selfish and manipulative France. Madden declared that such a scenario was a thing of the past: in the nineteenth-century liberal world, the government would yield to just demands.⁴⁵ Yet he was well aware that the politics of reform which he had witnessed in the late 1820s and early '30s, all, to some extent, drew upon the threat of violence: Catholic emancipation, parliamentary reform and abolition of slavery were all adopted by governments seeking to avert the possibility of revolt and revolution. At the 1836 parliamentary committee, there were many voices urging that apprenticeship was unworkable but only Madden pressed this argument by declaring that if it were not immediately removed the tensions it was provoking could produce another Jamaican revolt.⁴⁶ As his *United Irishmen* went to the press the Repeal movement, to which he gave his support, was moving into similar brinkmanship. Madden's critics accused his book of encouraging rebellion, an accusation he always denied saying that he had journeyed widely and always observed rebellion left the people worse off than before. His book was a warning, not only to oppressive governments, but to the high minded and frustrated reformer, that violent insurrection opened the floodgates of treachery and would make him the victim of the most dishonourable among those he struggled to free.⁴⁷ Yet the energy and diligence with which Madden researched and wrote up the details of betrayal, the enthusiastic unmasking of scoundrels everywhere, suggested a fascination with rebellion. Here again such interests were fostered by slave society, where rumours and discussions of past and possible conspiracy and revolt were part of daily life. As Madden worked on his Irish books and papers in Cuba,

42 R. R. Madden, 'Address to the Hibernian Anti-slavery Society' Feb. 1840, printed as an appendix to Manzano, *Poems by a Slave* pp. 135-7. 43 RIA, Madden Papers, MS. 24.0.9, fols. 363-75, Madden to J. Weldon, Aug. 1847. 44 *Ibid.*, fols. 349-59, Madden to Joseph Sturge, 12 Oct. 1845. 45 Madden, *The United Irishmen* (Dublin, 1846), i, p. x. 46 'Select Committee' in *Parliamentary Papers*, p. 52. 47 RIA, Madden Papers, MS. 24.0.9, fols. 589-97, Madden to T.C. Mathieson, 1850; *The United Irishmen* (Dublin, 1846), i, p. ix.

the real world reinforced the literary one. Then the *Amistad* case re-enacted the themes of oppression, injustice, violence, forgery and deception.

The weaknesses of style and format which dogged Madden's historical work also owe much to anti-slavery. It trained him to take the moral high ground and defend it in a lengthy and disputatious manner disturbing to any piece requiring narrative flow. But above all, the demands of his professional career shaped the book's construction. Material was collected hurriedly on short visits to Ireland or by friends and put together quickly as he moved from place to place acquiring anti-slavery information and writing it up for official purposes, public lectures or general publication. Thus the format of individual biographies, which in the end produced a disjointed and repetitive history, was adopted and never abandoned. It is no accident that the 1998 commemoration did not produce a republication. Yet for later historians the book remains an exciting bran tub packed with hypotheses to confirm or deny, documents printed in their entirety, memoirs produced at Madden's behest which might otherwise have remained unwritten or unpublished. Meanwhile, time has matured *Twelve-month's Residence in the West Indies* into a very similar resource, supplying not only detail on the well-recorded issue of apprenticeship but rarer material exploited by historians working on a wide range of subjects from attempts to reconstruct African memories of the Atlantic slave trade to the development of Creole speech in the Caribbean.⁴⁸

48 Madden, *A Twelve-month's Residence in the West Indies during the Transition from Slavery to Apprenticeship*, facsimile edition (Connecticut, 1970); Ivor Wilks, 'Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq of Timbuktu' in P.D. Curtin (ed.), *Narrative of West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade* (London, 1967), pp. 152–69, where Madden, *West Indies*, ii, pp. 199–201 is reprinted and discussed; Barbara Lalla and Jean D'Costa, *Language in Exile: Three Hundred Years of Jamaican Creole* (London, 1990) pp. 163–4.