

George Donisthorpe Thompson (1804-1878)

George Thompson (1804-78) authored the letters and Parliamentary document found in Wright's letter collection. These appear below.

Among England's most brilliant orators, Thompson spoke out against the global slave trade. He denounced the institution of slavery in the West Indies and the United States. India's colonial status and its impending independence from Great Britain compelled him to seek and propose intermediary solutions to observable inequities. Elected to the House of Commons in 1847, Thompson served as a Member of Parliament (MP) representing Tower Hamlets (London) until 1852.

Thompson hailed from Liverpool and was largely self-educated. His father, a man of letters and a bookseller, guided his studies. From the age of 12, Thompson worked in the City of London, England's financial district. His years in "the City" directed his attention to the self-improvement and moral consciousness movements of that day and age. He used his silver-tongued eloquence to raise public awareness of such issues, in addition to the socio-political stances he defended. Wright and Garrison would have been kindred souls.



*George Thompson by Charles Turner, National Portrait Gallery
Painted from a mezzotint by George Evans published in 1842*

Thompson's grandiloquence earned him great favor. In 1831 he took on the role of travelling speaker for the London Anti-Slavery Society. He drew crowds. In 1833 he defended his anti-slavery convictions in a series of debates conducted in locations around the U.K. National notoriety ensued. When slavery was abolished in Britain and its colonial territories in 1833, he dedicated his efforts to the universal eradication of the

peculiar institution. (The Act to Abolish the Transatlantic Slave Trade passed previously, in 1807. Abolitionists considered the act inadequate.)

Thompson gave personal and professional time to the abolition movement, as well as to free trade and pacifism. He participated in founding anti-slavery societies in Edinburgh (the Edinburgh Society for the Abolition of Slavery Throughout the World) and Glasgow and, like Garrison, he promoted immediate emancipation. He, Garrison and Frederick Douglass, who made Thompson's home his London base during his U.K. tour, established the Anti-Slavery League in August 1846.

In the 1840's, the Free Church of Scotland (Known in some quarters as the Evangelical Alliance) accepted financial contributions from slave-owning members of affiliated churches in the U.S. The Scottish church's fiscal maneuvering ignited social and political controversy throughout the U.K. Like Wright and many U.K. abolitionists, Thompson called for the Free Church to return the money received from slave owners.

Thompson didn't shy from Atlantic crossings. He paid visits to the U.S. a number of times, including a 15-month speaking tour that commenced in 1833. Collaborating with members of the American Anti-Slavery Society, he helped form over 300 abolitionist branch associations. He received threats to his life and in 1835 pro-slavery demonstrators mobbed him and Garrison. Thompson fled Boston for England. He returned to the U.S. in later years, at one point meeting with Abraham Lincoln and William Wells Brown during the Civil War. Thompson was present for the raising of the Union flag over Fort Sumter on 14 April 1865, at the close of the U.S. Civil War.

George Thompson wrote Wright from Edinburgh in 1846. In this letter he discusses the debate in the U.K. over gradual versus immediate emancipation. He advocated the latter.

George Thompson Esq
Dear Sir

I heard your speech last night with much pleasure and in intruding myself on your notices, I [conclude], [and] as far as you [are concerned] it is from no unfriendly feeling – quite the reverse. Allow me however to correct a slight mistake you made in regard to historical fact. I refer to the statement that Dr. ..Ritchie [Polermus] seconded the amendment made by D Andrew Thomson at that memorable Meeting held in the Assembly chambers in 1830. I was present at all those meetings. I took a

warm interest in the subject; the scene which was exhibited that day made such an impression on my mind that it is still fresh in my memory

The (then) Lord Provost (Mr Allan) was in the Chair. A string of resolutions in favour of gradual emancipation were moved by Francis Jeffery, Mr Lord Jeffrey in a speech which occupied 2 ¼ hours. These were seconded by Dr. Ritchie, where upon Dr Andrew Thomson rose, and in a short but eloquent speech moved an amendment in favour of immediate emancipation – Unfortunately for himself, the Lord Provost volunteered a reply to Dr. Thomson; his - being neither a match for Dr. Thomson in eloquence, nor in the goodness of his cause – was failed. Finding himself worsted he lost his temper, and as a last resort, called out that as the amendment was not seconded, it must fall to the ground; upon which H.D. Dickie Esq a respectable citizen and a Dissenter, rose and said, “rather than Dr. Thomson’ motion should fall to the ground I will second it” –

The Lord Provost [who was] anxious to defeat Dr. Thomson again objected that Mr Dickie was not a member of the Emancipation Soc and therefore not entitled to vote. In this he was mistaken. After some further discussion in favour of gradual Emancipation, Mr. Dickie rose again & drove the nail to the head as regards that day’s proceedings by saying –

“When he seconded the motion of Dr T. he did not state his reasons, but his maxim was borrowed from a Heathen Philosopher who said ‘fiat iustitia, ruat caelum’ which would [be in] English thus, let justice be done, be the consequences what they may [“though the heavens fall”](attributed to Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus). Upon which the Provost rose & said, I cannot preside at a meeting where such sentiments are uttered and immediately took his hat and walked off.

The meeting being thus deprived of its chairman, before the resolutions were put to the vote, the whole proceedings fell to the ground, an adjournment was carried and it was at a second meeting held in the same place a fortnight thereafter that Dr Thomson made that brilliant speech of 3 hours which has never been surpassed for tremendous eloquence

In correcting this mistake, I mean no disparagement to Dr. Ritchie. You will ... know, that at that period he was only a gradual Abolitionist. –

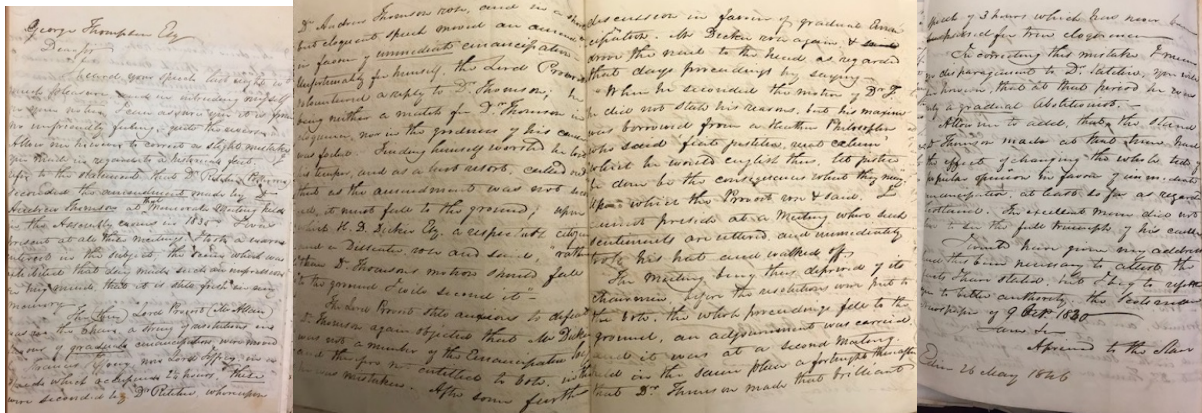
Allow me to add, that, the stand D Thomson made at that time had the effect of changing the whole tide of popular opinion in favour of immediate emancipation, at least so far as regarding Scotland. An excellent man did not live to see the full triumph of his cause.

I would have given my address had that been necessary to attend the facts I have stated, but I beg to refer you to better authority, the Scotsman Newspaper of 9 Oct 1830

I am d....

A friend to the Slave

Edin 26 May 1846



The following short note suggests a schedule for the U.K. Anti-Slavery League's (founded by Garrison, Douglass and Thompson) programming. It hints at the success of their efforts heretofore.

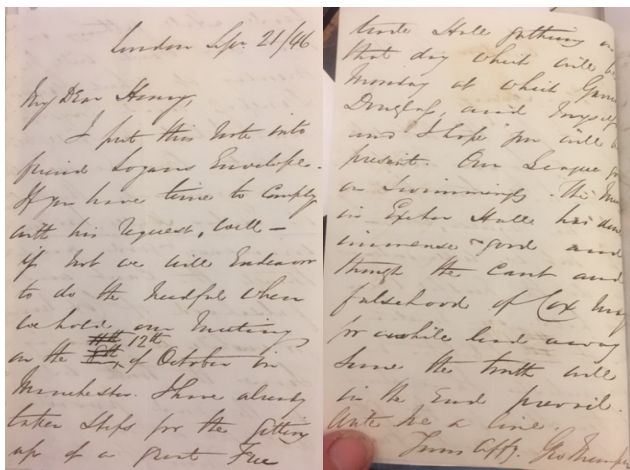
London Sept 21/46

My Dear Henry,

I put this note into friend Logan's envelope. If you have time to comply with his request, call ___ if not we will endeavor to do the heedful when we hold our meeting on the 8th-11th 12th of October in Manchester. I have already taken steps for the getting up of a print Free Trade Hall gathering on that day which will be Monday at which Garrison, Douglass and I myself and I hope you will be present. Our League forges on swimmingly. This meeting in Exeter Hall has done immense good and though the cant and falsehood of Cox essay for [awhile] leads away some, the truth will in the end prevail. Write me a line.

From [Affy.]

Geo Thompson



In the following letter, Thompson weighs in on Wright's possible return to the U.S. Thompson writes he would like him to stay in the U.K. a while longer (Wright did stay into the Spring of 1847). In this exchange he explains how Wright could be useful to the anti-slavery movement from the U.K. He says he does not want Wright to make speeches, preferring that he write essays and articles, as well as organize publishing and distribution of reform literature in behalf of the "League."

London Sep~ 22. 1846

My Dear Henry,

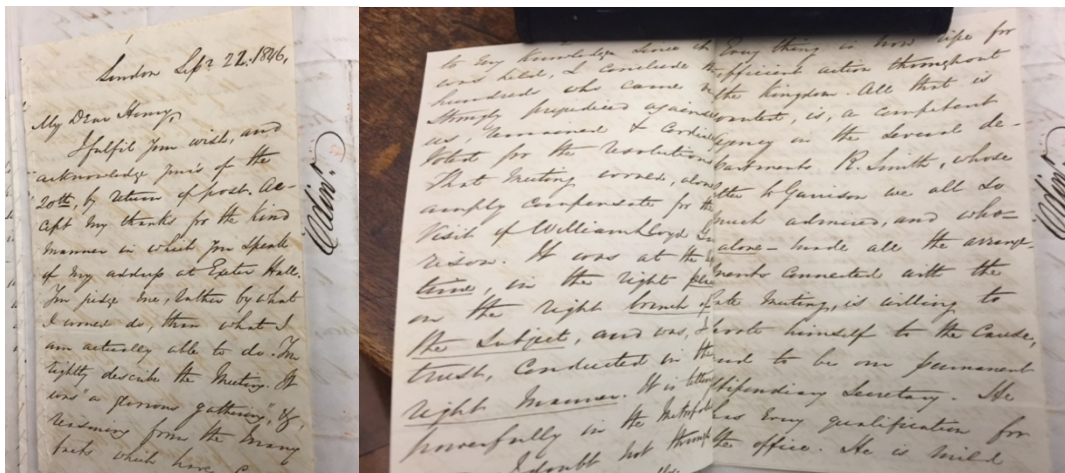
I fulfill your wish, and acknowledge yours of the 20th, by return of post. Accept my thanks for the kind manner in which you speak of my address at Exeter Hall. You judge me, rather by what I would do, than what I am actually able to do. You rightly describe the Meeting. It was "a glorious gathering," of, reasoning from the many facts which have come to my knowledge since it was held, I conclude the hundreds who came very strongly prejudiced against us, remained & cordially noted for the resolutions that meeting would along amply compensate for the visit of William Lloyd Garrison. It was at the right time, in the right place, on the right branch of the subject, and was, I trust conducted in the right manner. It is telling powerfully in the metropolis and I doubt not through the Provinces, generally.

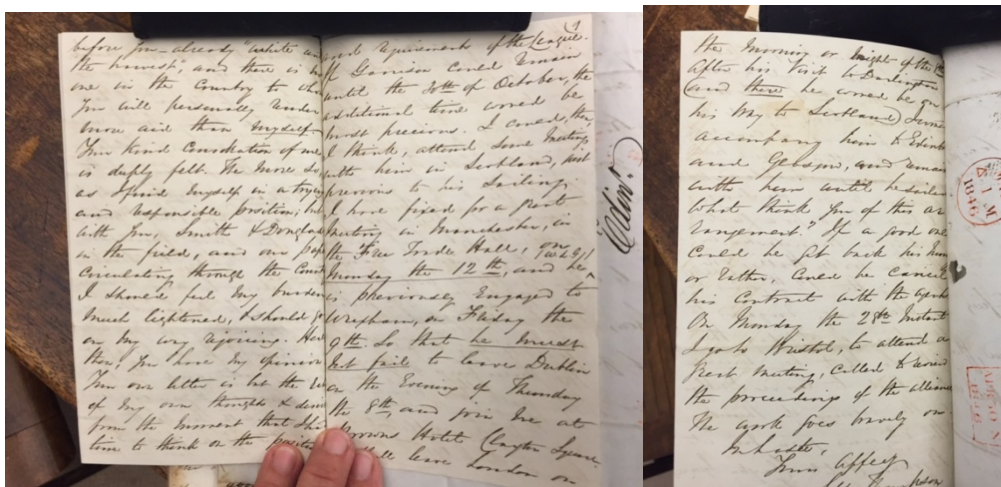
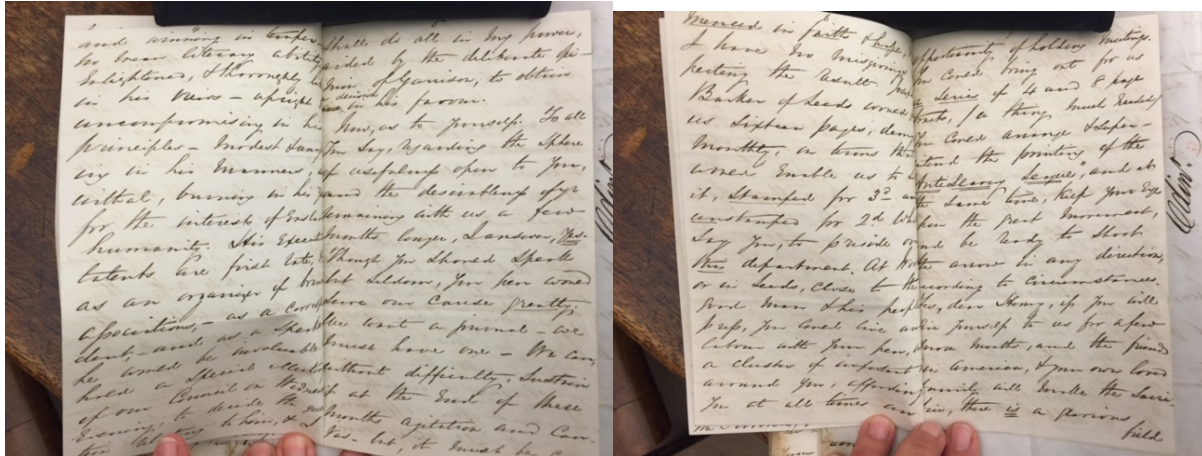
Everything is now ripe for efficient action throughout the Kingdom. All that is wanted, is, a competent agency in the several departments. R. Smith, whose letter to Garrison we all so much admired, and who alone –made all the arrangements connected with the late meeting, is willing to devote himself to the cause, and to be our permanent [fiduciary] Secretary. He has every qualification for the office. He is mild and winning in temper – [with] no mean literary ability – enlightened, & thoroughly liberal in his views – upright & uncompromising in his principles – modest & unassuming in his manner, and withal, burning in his zeal for the interests of enslaved humanity. His executive talents are first rate; & as an organizer of branch associations, – as a correspondent, - and as a speaker he would be invaluable. We hold a special meeting of our Council on Wednesday evening, to decide the question relating to him, & I shall do all in my power, aided by the deliberate opinion of Garrison, to obtain a decision in his favour.

Now, as to yourself. To all you say, regarding the sphere of usefulness open to you, and the desirableness of ur remaining with us a few months longer, I answer, yes. Though you should speak but seldom, your pen would serve our cause greatly. We want a journal – we must have one – We can, without difficulty, sustain it at the end of three months agitation and canvas – but, it must be conceived in faith & hope, & I have no misgivings respecting the result. Joseph Barker of Leeds would give us sixteen pages, [semi] monthly, in terms that would enable us to sell it, stamped for 3d and unstamped for 2d What say you, to preside over this department. At Wresham or in Leeds, close to the good man & his peoples' press, you could live and labour with your

pen, with a cluster of important men around you, affording you at all times an opportunity of holding meetings. You could bring out for us a series of 4- and 8-page tracts, /a thing much needed/ You could arrange & superintend the printing of the Anti-Slavery League," and at the same time, keep your eye upon the great movement, and be ready to shoot the arrow in any direction, according to circumstances. Yes, dear Henry, if you will give yourself to us for a few more months, and the friends in America, & your own loved family will make the sacrifice, there is a glorious field before you _ already "white unto the harvest," and there is no one in the country to whom you will personally render more aid than myself. Your kind consideration of me is deeply felt. The more so, as I find myself in a trying and responsible position; but with you, Smith & Douglass in the field, and our paper circulating through the country, I should feel my burden much lightened, & should go on my way rejoicing. Here then, you have my opinion. Your own letter is but the express [reflection] of my own thoughts & desires from the moment that I had time to think on the position and requirements of the League. If Garrison could remain until the 30th of October, the additional time would be most precious. I could, then, I think, attend some meetings with him in Scotland, just previous to his sailing. I have fixed for a great meeting in Manchester, in the Free Trade Hall, on Monday the 12th, and he W.L.G. is previously engaged in Wrexham, on Friday the 9th. So that he must not fail to leave Dublin on the evening of Thursday the 8th, and join me at Browns Hotel Clayton Square. I shall leave London on the morning or night of the 8th After his visit to Darlington (and then he could be on his way to Scotland) I would accompany him to Edinburgh and Glasgow, and remain with him until he sailed. What think you of this arrangement? If a good one, could he cancel his contract with the agents? On Monday the 28th [in any case] I go to Bristol, to attend a great meeting, called to review the proceedings of the Alliance. The good work goes bravely on.

In haste, yours affectionately
 Geo Thompson





In the letter below Thompson comments on a resolution drafted by a Manchester branch of the "Alliance" (Evangelical Alliance between Scottish Free Church, American Presbyterians and various other denominations). He finds himself at odds with its details, but recommends discretion. He wants to hold criticism until the public reaction is known.

London Nov 10. 1846

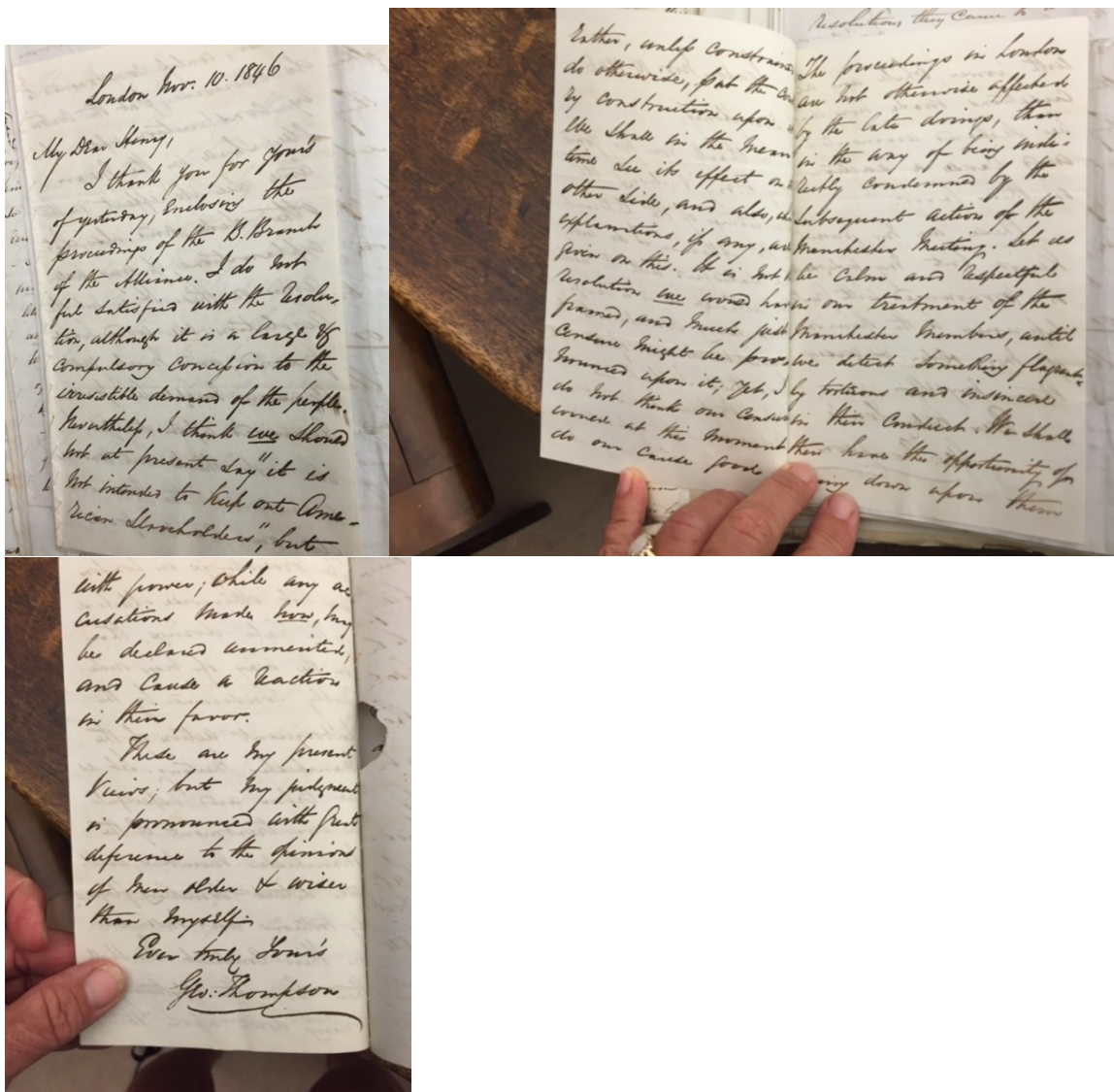
My Dear Henry,

I thank you for yours of yesterday, enclosing the proceedings of the B. Branch of the Alliance. I do not feel satisfied with the resolution, although it is a large & compulsory concession to the irresistible demand of the people. Nevertheless, I think we should not at present say "it is not intended to keep out American slaveholders," but rather, unless constrained to do otherwise, & at the contrary construction upon it. We shall in the mean time see its effect on the other side and also, what explanations, if any, are given on this. It is not the resolution we would have framed, and much just

censure might be pronounced upon it; yet, I do not think our censure would at this moment do our cause good. The proceedings in London are not otherwise affected by the late doings, than in the way of being indirectly condemned by the subsequent actions of the Manchester Meeting. Let us be calm and respectful in our treatment of the Manchester members, until we detect something flagrantly malicious and insincere in their conduct. We shall then have the opportunity of coming down upon them with power; while any accusations made now, may be declared unmerited and cause a reaction in their favor.

These are my present views; but my judgment is pronounced with great deference to the opinions of men older & wiser than myself.

Ever truly your's
Geo: Thompson



In this note to Wright, Thompson talks about the League. He comments on material he doesn't see as fit for publication. One assumes his reference to "business her," (in London) refers to Parliamentary duties.

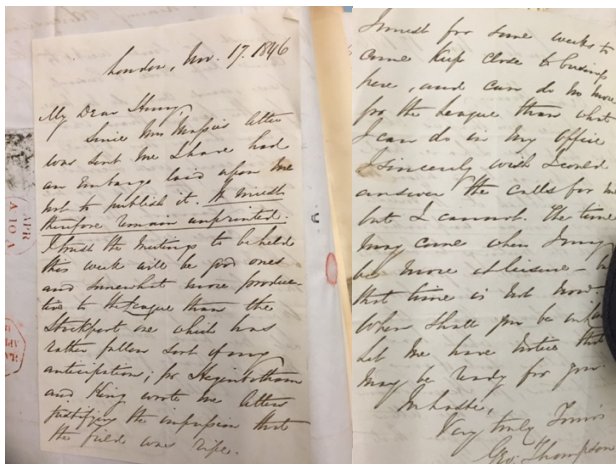
London, Nov. 17. 1846

My Dear Henry,

Since Mrs Massius letter was sent me I have had an embargo laid upon me not to publish it. It must therefore remain unprinted. I trust the meetings to be held this week will be good ones and somewhat more productive to the League (Great Britain's Anti-Slavery League founded by Douglass, Garrison, & Thompson) than the Stockport one which has rather fallen short of my anticipations; for [Higginbotham] and King wrote me letters [relaying] the impression that the field was ripe [rife]. I must for some weeks [keep close] to business here, and can do no more for the League than what I can do in my office.

I sincerely wish I could answer the calls for me but I cannot. The time may come when I may be more at leisure _ but that time is not now. When shall you be in London. Let me have notice that I may be ready for you

In haste, Geo Thompson



Henry Clarke Wright pasted the document that appears below into his letter book. Authored by M.P. George Thompson, the proposed legislation bears the date May 13, 1846.

Thompson's proposed bill seeks to amend legislation that imposed English taxes on Indian citizens. At the time Great Britain controlled the territory of what is present-day India. Backed by the U.K. government, the British East India Company ran a trade monopoly employing many Indian citizens in low-paying jobs. Thompson calls for an "amendment" that would transfer the weight of taxes from the subcontinent's citizenry

to the British East India Company. He suggests that pensions for Lieutenant-General Viscount Hardinge and General Lord Gough should "be paid out of the dividends accruing" from the Capital Stock of the East India Company, and should not be charged to the suffering and already over-burdened "Natives of India."

Thompson was involved in establishing the British India Society in 1839. The British India Society's mission was to bring to light "known wrongs" visited on the people of India. The Society also sought to augment "Indian cotton [sales] and undersell slave-grown [Cotton] from the United States." Thompson served as president of the Bengal British India Society, established in 1843. The Bengal British India Society studied and reported on the state of affairs in British India, promoted loyalty to British rule and advocated for the general public interest.

