

LETTER FROM JOHN MITCHEL TO HON. BENJAMIN WOOD

New York, June 13, 1865.

DEAR SIR – As my arrival in this city, and connection, as an editorial contributor, with your journal, has occasioned much hostile comment from some other newspapers of New York, which persist in terming me “rebel,” and loudly call for my punishment as a traitor, I think it desirable that I should once for all “define my position,” as that seems to be a subject of some interest to a portion of the public. So long as a Southern Confederacy existed I was a Confederate secessionist, or what some persons choose to term a rebel. From the moment of General Johnson’s surrender to Gen. Sherman, at Greensboro, I perceived that the cause of the Confederacy was utterly lost. There was no longer a Confederate government – it had disappeared from human eyes; and inasmuch as a country cannot be without a government, and the only government then in fact subsisting being the Federal government of the United States, I owed to it, from that instant, full obedience – which obedience I at once yielded in good faith, as I think my fellow-citizens in the South very generally did at the same time, and for the same reason. I am, therefore, no longer a secessionist nor a rebel; but a Unionist, and a lawful citizen. By appeal to arms, in assertion of the right to secede, the Southern states accepted beforehand the arbitrament of that sovereign tribunal. The decision has gone against them – no matter by what means, or by virtue of what overwhelming odds – against them it is. And I believe that all Southern men of high and honourable character do frankly accept the new position that war has made for them, and acknowledge the duty of applying themselves to the task of reconstructing and re-establishing their society upon the basis of the Union and the constitution of the United States. This they will assuredly do, if they are permitted to do it in peace; if the successful government do not trample them into the earth, or torture them by prosecutions for the crime of having asserted a right long known to

have been claimed by most Southern politicians, and admitted by many at the North also.

The institution of slavery is virtually abolished on this continent. The irrepressible conflict between free labour and slave labour has come; and slave labour has gone. To this also the Southern people submit. On this point also they accept the decision of the war; and if they do so with reluctance and regret, it is but just to them to say that in most cases their sorrow is more for the fate which threatens that unhappy race they have protected so long than for the loss of the money-value of their slaves; which money-value indeed was less than nothing, inasmuch as they could at all times have had labour on much cheaper terms. Some newspapers taunt me with inconsistency, in that I stood up for liberty in my native country, and then came and advocated slavery here. I cannot perceive the inconsistency. The liberty which I sought for Ireland was national independence only; and that only was what I sought for the South. I wished that Ireland should have the power to regulate her institutions in her own way, and I wished the Southern States to have the same power. I wished to repeal an enforced "Union" of Ireland with England, and I wished to resist the enforcement of a Union between Virginia and New York. Where is the inconsistency? Others persistently charge me with having written everything objectionable to them which they can rake up out of the columns of the *Richmond Examiner* and the *Richmond Enquirer* for some years past. I was never, at any time, the editor of either of these journals. I refused to be responsible for all that appeared in them; never read their "personals," and never used that medium to give aid and comfort to the enemy, or either of the enemies. Further, I never, by writing or speech, approved of any maltreatment or starvation of Federal prisoners at the South; nor was I aware there ever was any maltreatment or starvation. The orders, as I knew, were to give these prisoners the same as the Confederate soldiers received; and I understood that those orders were carried out. To be sure, Confederate soldiers were sometimes meagre enough; but I must be excused if I decline to believe all the dreadful stories told about this matter, or, indeed, about anything else, by witnesses before the military gentlemen at Washington.

What more must I deny? I never recommended the roasting of my fellow-creatures with vitriol and camphine, nor with either of them? What more? I never devoured my enemies, whether roast or boiled, with vitriol sauce, or with dragon's blood. And if any one affirms that I flogged to death my negro wench in Alabama with a curiously twisted cowhide – or that I hired Booth – or purchased the bowie knife for Payne – I would modestly ask him to prove the fact – but not before the military gentlemen at Washington. I bar that. So much for the past. As for the present and future, I have thought proper, without leave asked of any one, to offer you such assistance as I can give, in the only daily journal in New York which has steadily upheld the true Democratic principle of State rights, has deprecated a war to enforce an unwilling Union, has advocated, when that war ceased, a system of real peace and conciliation, such as would enable Southern men heartily to co-operate in the task of reconstruction – and, above all, has opposed senseless prosecutions for what is most improperly called treason, and the ill-omened practice of military courts in time of peace. The separate independence of the South being proved to be impossible, it has seemed to me that the best hope of preserving the liberties of the whole country lies in the Democratic party, with which the whole South will naturally ally itself as before, and of which I conceive the *Daily News* to be the truest and boldest organ. I say that I asked leave of nobody to come to this city and to write in the *News*. Further, I do not conceive myself to be here, and going at large, by virtue of the “amnesty” that some papers have mentioned. Neither have I asked any “pardon,” and I trust the President will not press a pardon upon me until I shall have been first convicted of something. I should be obliged, with thanks for his politeness, to decline it. He is very kind; but I do not use the article.

JOHN MITCHEL.

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