

Sir,—The letter upon the subject of penal transportation to the Cameroons Mountains which you kindly allowed to appear in your issue of Wednesday, the 31st of December, having excited some attention—on the next day an anonymous letter characterized it as an “abominable production,” and threatened the writer with the earliest possible “garotting.”—I am induced to hope that you will lend me your valuable assistance in clearing away certain objections and difficulties which suggest themselves to those who are ignorant of the capabilities of the West African coast.

I will begin by stating that the climate is remarkably well adapted for the accommodation of long-term convicts. It seems the fashion in England to preface all proposals for new penal settlements by assuring the public that the places in view are regions of health and comfort—Acadies, in fact, where sentimental criminals may convert themselves into Gabriels and Basils (the blacksmiths), and in due season espouse Evangelines. They manage things better over the water, where “Cayenne” sounds somewhat ominous in French ears. But the Cameroons region is better than either Acadie, Cayenne, or the Bay of Herbs. It has its healthy sites, where convicts who evince industry and good will could be located in comparative freedom. It has its *mal paizes*, where the worse sort would soon lose that superabundant energy which distinguishes them at home; and in all cases the influence of the tropics would greatly tend to soften their manners, and not permit them to be ferocious.

I deny that any cruelty would be necessary—as has been asserted—to manage such a settlement. It is fear that makes men over-severe. A sudden outburst of criminal violence is influencing us, not for good. A popular almanac has just published an illustration showing the “garotter’s lunch as we would administer it.” The wretch, with head and hands riveted in the “hieroglyphic State machine,” and with body lashed round with a rope, writhes under a “cat” heavy and harmful as that whip of scorpions with which, according to Moslems, the Kafir shall expiate his sins in Jehannum. On the other hand, over-leniency is as carefully to be avoided. Far too much stress has of late years, in my humble opinion, been laid upon the reformation of the criminal. The first duty of society is to protect itself from its internal enemies. The second is to obtain from the malefactor, by compulsion when necessary, an equivalent of the evil he has committed. The third—some will deem this Quixotic—is to make an example of the offender for the benefit of the millions who become good or bad men by the force of circumstances. Fourthly and lastly comes the duty of reforming and restoring the outcasts to society, a perilous task, which has apparently been allowed undue precedence.

It is evident that, by clearing the Cameroons Mountains, the convicts would be but repaying their debt to society. As was explained in your issue of the 31st of December—an excellent letter from Captain Babington, published in this morning’s paper, corroborates every assertion before advanced—a sanatorium is sadly needed for the fever-stricken shores of Western Africa. When those works shall be completed the slopes of the mountain would be cleared of forest, and plantations of cocoa and plantain would take the place of the primeval “bush.” The land is everywhere admirably adapted for chocolate. The shrub keeps the ground clear of grass, and an investment of 1,000*l.* should bring in, after the third year, 25 per cent. Nothing would be easier than the cultivation of cocoa, as Prince’s Island and San Thomè prove. The land would be cleared, after the fashion of the aborigines, by cutting down and firing the underwood, at the same time thinning out the trees, which would supply timber for houses and palisades. About 500 men, arriving at Amboise Bay in August or September, would begin after the two months of “seasoning” the labours of bush-clearing, hut-building, fencing, gardening and road-making. The same number of acres roughly prepared would produce a sufficiency of yam and koko, cassava and sweet potato, Indian corn and ground-nuts, banana and breadfruits, while oil, wine, and vinegar are found in every palm. Stock would immediately follow, and after the second year the settlement should require no rations from Europe. The site could be recommended on the mere grounds of economy.

The convicts might be divided into two classes, which the long sea voyage and the preparatory months of acclimatization would separate with no uncertain hand. The well-conducted could be placed, without other surveillance but a weekly report at head-quarters, upon the plantation. The confirmed in crime would work in irons, and pass their nights on board hulks in the harbour. In both cases escape would be vain. Climate and hunger would soon check all attempts to “levant.” The Spanish authorities at Fernando Po find hulks comfortable enough for political offenders, and sensible Englishman would not object to them for the cowardly “garotter.” White guards are unnecessary. A company or two detached from the West Indian Regiments, and kept there for short service, would, under their well-acclimatized officers and an energetic commandant of the station, be amply sufficient for defence against violent outbreaks.

The English public here desires a penal transportation; there a sanitary station is as urgently needed. I see no reason why the measures should not be combined, and I have taken the liberty of requesting you to give the subject due publicity.

I am, Sir, your most obedient servant,  
RICHARD F. BURTON, F.R.G.S.

Jan. 7.