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The Antislavery Poems of John Marjoribanks

> HAIL! rising Genius of fair Scotia's Isle!
> On thee the Muses only deign to smile!

The extravagant eulogy to which these lines belong appeared in the *Jamaica Gazette* in the 1780s. It was addressed not to Robert Burns (as the unwary might guess) but to his almost unknown contemporary and countryman, John Marjoribanks (pronounced Marchbanks). The rising genius was at that time serving in Jamaica as an officer in an infantry regiment, but he was already the author of a two-volume collection of poems, published in Kelso under the title *Trifles in Verse. By a Young Soldier* (1784). The tribute to him celebrated the publication of a second edition of this work, in three volumes, a year later.[1] The additional volume consisted mainly of poems written in Jamaica, with notes identifying sessyl s s si(ona)4(l) whll s v

during the War of Independence, and died in 1781 of wounds sustained while making an honorable stand at the battle of Eutaw Springs.[5] John Marjoribanks the younger was educated at Kelso Grammar School, and afterwards spent five or six years in Edinburgh, during which he appears to have matriculated at the university[6] but without graduating. His father's estate, which he inherited in 1781, was heavily burdened with debt and had to be sold. In 1782 Marjoribanks secured a commission in the army and was sent to Jamaica in 1783 to join his regiment, the 19th Foot, which had its headquarters at Stoneyhill Barracks on the outskirts of Kingston. He remained in Jamaica for nearly four years, seeing no military action but taking an active part in the social and literary life of Kingston, and joining all too heartily in the regimental recreations of heavy drinking and sexual adventures.[7]

> Where, safe from tyrants, he may widely stray,
> And pale-fac'd CHRISTIANS ne'er can find the way.

Literary influence is more apparent here than topical reference: the facile image of enslavement as a state of generalised "sorrows" and "pains," contrasted with the slave's dream of pastoral freedom in his native land, owes as much to earlier eighteenth-century poetic imaginings as to Scottish moral philosophy or legal argument. Pope's "Indian" slave, in a much-quoted passage from *An Essay on Man,* dreams similarly of:

> Some safer world in depth of woods embrac'd,
> Some happier island in the wat'ry waste,
> Where slaves once more their native land behold,
> No fiends torment, no Christians thirst for gold.[13]

The surprise, then, is not that a young Scot imbued with the principles of Augustan humanism and Enlightenment philosophy should deplore slavery in the abstract: it is that his airy principles should survive exposure to the social life and ethos of slave-owning planters and merchants in a British colony. It is now widely recognised that on the issue of slavery there was a yawning gap between principles and practice among Scots of Marjoribanks's class in the later eighteenth century and after. The phenomenon has been forcefully described by Duncan Rice:

> The ethics and expediency of slavery were canvassed repeatedly in the network of convivial and debating clubs which the major Scottish cities supported from the fifties [i.e. 1750s] onwards. The treatises of Hume and Robert Wallace, for instance,

emigrants, “even highly literate ones, however much their mentors had demonstrated that slavery was at odds with natural law.”[14]

Indeed, there is a good deal of anecdotal evidence to show that those Scots who went out to the West Indies with humanitarian scruples about the slave system rapidly became hardened to the customs of the country. The desensitizing effect of daily exposure to the brutalities of the slave system is described by one of these, Zachary Macaulay. Son of the kirk minister of Inveraray, he grew up in Scotland and later became one of the most vigorous and effective campaigners against the slave trade and slavery itself; but in 1785, at the age of sixteen, he went out to Jamaica to work as bookkeeper on a sugar plantation. He remained there for four years (at the very time when Marjoribanks was in Jamaica, though there is no evidence that they ever met) and afterwards recorded a brief account of his experiences. His job as bookkeeper was “laborious, irksome, and degrading in a degree of which I could have no previous conception,” but he was even more strongly affected at first by the fact that “by my situation I was exposed not only to the sight, but also to the practice of severities over others, the very recollection of which makes my blood run cold.” Although “at first feelingly alive to the miseries of the poor slaves,” he persuaded himself that the only way to retain the respect of his white colleagues and do his job effectively was deliberately to inure himself to the slaves’ sufferings. Macaulay quotes a letter of his own,

In short, adds Macaulay, he had become "callous and indifferent" to "the miseries of the Negroes."[15]

How Robert Burns might have reacted to the experience of plantation slavery if he had gone to Jamaica in 1786, as he planned, is a matter of recent conjecture.[16] But the effect on Marjoribanks of his own observation of slave life is clear: it turned him from highminded abhorrence of slavery in the abstract to passionate denunciation of the slave system as he encountered it in actuality. His earliest poem based on experience dates from 1785, during his second year in the colony, and he did not cease to write against slavery until he was silenced by terminal illness.

Slavery; An Essay in Verse, is "humbly inscribed" on the titlepage "to Planters, Merchants, and others concerned in the Management or Sale of Negro Slaves;" as Basker remarks, "Marjoribanks was obviously aware that he was engaged in a battle of competing discourses for control of public opinion and government policy."[17] Publication of the work in 1792 was clearly timed to support the passage of

The haughty Roman to destroy his friend;
But keener injuries the Negro fir'd
To end a tyrant, and to kill a fiend.

honoured as a hero, the slave, who owed nothing to his masters except forced exile, chains, hard labour, and the whip, suffers an agonising and ignominious death.

The author's sympathy with the slave is obvious in the poem, but it is underlined by further comment in the footnote already quoted, describing the slave's crime and punishment; the note continues, with Swiftian obliquity:

> Of the many strong arguments which have been urged in favour of the abolition of the Slave-Trade, one of the most obvious and incontrovertible, is surely this: That the constant importation of savage and untamed spirits into the islands, not only subjects the white inhabitants to frequent alarm, danger, and sometimes death itself (to which they are seldom or never exposed from the Creole Negroes); but also affords the plea of necessity to punishments the most shocking to humanity, and highly disgraceful to the colonies of a civilized nation.[28]

Marjoribanks was not always successful in controlling his raw indignation, however. A month later, in "On the Destructive Hurricane, which happened on the 27th August 1785" (the poem is dated 22 September 1785), he addressed the issue of slavery again, but without irony this time.

Hurricanes were a favourite topic in verse descriptions of the West Indies, giving the

> And, though he did, he'd thank his gentle jury,
> He need not give one farthing for my fury.

A footnote identifies Kimber as "the master of a slave-ship, who was tried for the murder of one or more negroes; but had the *good fortune* to be acquitted." Marjoribanks's memory was not quite accurate; Captain Kimber was accused in fact of savagely abusing and killing a girl of fifteen, in front of the entire crew. He was tried for her murder in June 1792, but acquitted on evidence which sufficed to convince an English jury of Kimber's "good character."[36]

Finally, one apparent stain on Marjoribanks's commitment to the antislavery cause has to be considered. At the end of "Slavery; An Essay in Verse" there is a footnote in which he appears to retreat from outright opposition to slavery itself, as distinct from opposition to the slave trade. He writes:

> If the reader imagine I here recommend the romantic, and as yet impracticable, scheme of emancipating the Negroes in the West-Indies; he greatly misunderstands me. My wishes (however obscurely they may be expressed,) though when first formed, not encouraged by the slightest or most distant hopes of gratification; did then, as now, perfectly coincide with what I conceive to be the laudable views of the societies since instituted, for the abolition of the trade to Africa for slaves; the meliorating the condition of those already in the islands; and, perhaps, in time, the gradual establishment of their freedom.[37]

Marjoribanks's disclaimer, I believe, was disingenuous: his writings elsewhere consistently proclaim that he found the whole slave system intolerable. But it was agreed by abolitionists in 1787 that success in the long-term campaign against slavery required separation of the *slave-trade* from the general issue of *slavery* itself, and that it was politic to concentrate in the first instance on opposition to the trade.[38] It seems more than likely therefore that when Marjoribanks proposed to dedicate the poem to the Secretary of the Edinburgh abolition society, Haliburton persuaded him to insert this cautionary note, possibly even as the price for giving his support to publication of the work.

[1] "To Ensign Marjoribanks," *Trifles in Verse: Volume Fourth. Being the Posthumous Poems of Captain John Marjoribanks, of a late Independent Company* (Edinburgh, 1798), 154. An editorial note says the poem "appeared in the JAMAICA GAZETTE, soon after the Publication of the Three First Volumes of TRIFLES IN VERSE" [1785].

[2] *Slavery; An Essay in Verse. By Captain Marjoribanks, of a late Independent Company: Formerly hn,].28*

[14] C. Duncan Rice, “Controversies over Slavery in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Scotland,” in Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman, eds., *Antislavery Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Abolitionists* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 24-48, 29-30. For detailed information about Scots in Jamaica in this period see Allan Karras, *Sojourners in the Sun: Scottish Migrants to Jamaica and the Chesapeake, 1740-1800* (I.013Td ,

[33] Ibid., 73-77.

[34] "To **** " dated 9th November 1795, *Trifles in Verse*, 1798, 86-8.

[35] Op. Cit., 89, dated 15th November 1795.

[36] For an account of Wilberforce's speech, Kimber's trial, and press coverage of the story, see Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 180-5.

[37] *Slavery*, 1792, 28.

[38] See Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, 2 vols. (London, 1808), 1.284-8.